

A SWIPE AT THE DRAGON OF THE COMMONPLACE: A RE-EVALUATION OF GEORGE MACDONALD'S FICTION

Ginger Stelle

**A Thesis Submitted for the Degree of PhD
at the
University of St Andrews**



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A RE-EVALUATION OF GEORGE MACDONALD'S FICTION**

Ginger Stelle

**Thesis submitted for the degree of Ph.D.
of the University of St. Andrews**

27 May 2011

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ABSTRACT

This thesis offers a re-evaluation of the fiction of George MacDonald (1824-1905), both fantasy and non-fantasy. The general trend in MacDonald studies is to focus primarily on his works of fantasy, either ignoring the rest (which includes non-fantasy fiction, sermons, poetry, and criticism) or using them to illuminate the fantasies. The overall critical consensus is that these works, particularly MacDonald's non-fantasy fiction, possess little inherent value. Though many critics acknowledge similarities between MacDonald's fantasy fiction and his non-fantasy fiction, MacDonald has been the victim of a critical double standard that treats fantasy and realism as completely irreconcilable, and allows certain features to be acceptable, even desirable, in one form that are completely unacceptable in the other. The thesis begins by looking at MacDonald's writings about the imagination and about literature, from which a clear theory of literature emerges, one with strong opinions about the function and purpose of literature, as well as about what makes good literature. By re-examining MacDonald's fiction, its plots, characterization and narration, in the light of his own theories, the reasons underlying the artistic choices made throughout his fiction take on a more deliberate and calculated appearance. Furthermore, by placing MacDonald in his proper context, and looking at the diversity of generic options available to the Victorian writer, the critical double standard underlying much MacDonald scholarship, based on a strict fantasy/realism separation, crumbles. What emerges from this analysis is a different MacDonald—a careful craftsman who consciously and skillfully uses the tools of his trade to produce a unique and specific reading experience.

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Introduction

In his 1987 biography of George MacDonald, William Raeper wrote “To say that George MacDonald is an unjustly neglected writer has become almost a cliché. Nevertheless it is surprising how slow critics have been to document his life and assess his works” (*George MacDonald* 11). In 1987, Raeper was absolutely correct. It was already a cliché to complain about academic neglect of MacDonald, and it was surprising how slowly critics were turning to him. Even more surprising, however, is that more than twenty years later, the situation really has not changed very much. In the first decade of the twenty-first century, MacDonald is still seen as a niche writer, seriously studied by a handful of critics and ignored by everyone else. His reputation as a writer of fantasy continues to grow, and his fantasy works—*Phantastes* (1858), *At the Back of the North Wind* (1871), *The Princess and the Goblin* (1872), *The Wise Woman* (1875), *The Princess and Curdie* (1882), *Lilith* (1896), and assorted shorter fairy tales—still continue to attract significant critical attention. However, as it is equally cliché to point out, fantasy is only one small part of MacDonald’s oeuvre. In the Johannesen reprints of MacDonald’s complete works,¹ the fantasies comprise only six-and-a-half of the forty-four volume total.² This is approximately 15% of MacDonald’s work. The remaining 85% consists of poetry, sermons, literary criticism, and a large number of non-fantasy novels,³ which are divided between Scottish and English settings. Yet, the 15% of MacDonald’s work generates the vast, vast majority of criticism. Despite repeated critical calls for a wider reassessment of MacDonald’s work, the rest of

¹ In current MacDonald scholarship, these are the most widely accepted versions to use. This is attested to by the Style Guide of *North Wind: The Journal of the George MacDonald Society*, which requests submission using these editions.

² *The Wise Woman: A Double Story* (1875) shares a volume with *The History of Gutta Percha Willie: The Working Genius* (1873), which is generally classified as a non-fantasy work.

³ Traditionally, critics refer to these works as “realist” or “realistic.” However, as will be discussed more in subsequent chapters, many of these texts draw on traditions other than the realist, and calling them “realist” has led to misclassification and misunderstanding. Nor can they simply be called “the novels” because MacDonald’s primary fantasies also qualify as novels. While it would be preferable to have a classification for these works that is not based in a negative (what they are not), no single term exists which satisfactorily accounts for the wide range of generic elements comprising MacDonald’s work.

MacDonald's oeuvre remains relatively untouched.

This critical tendency to prefer one section of MacDonald's work over the other sections is not new, although which part is preferred has changed. During his lifetime (1824-1905), the situation was reversed. Neither critics nor the reading public knew what to make of *Phantastes* when it first appeared. Rolland Hein (1993) writes that "*Phantastes* was, in the eyes of the critics, a colossal failure" (*Victorian Mythmaker* 212), and it failed to make much of a commercial impact (Raeper, *George MacDonald* 163). Five years later, however, when he published his first more conventional novel, *David Elginbrod* (1863), "It was immediately well received. The *Times* described it as 'the work of a man of genius,' and the *Athenaeum* gave it a laudatory three-column review" (Hein, *Victorian Mythmaker* 236). Raeper notes that "MacDonald was taken *seriously* as a popular novelist. His difficult prose style was accepted without murmur as was the dense Scots dialect employed without much concession to the English reader" (*The Gold Thread* 6). His contemporaries found much to admire in his non-fantasy novels, and he was widely respected for his writings. As the period progressed, however, MacDonald's "work was increasingly disdained by the established critics, who thought he should confine himself to writing art that would entertain," although it continued to be widely read by the general public (Hein, *Victorian Mythmaker* 395).

After MacDonald's death in 1905, his critical reputation continued to go downhill. Writing in 1911, his son Ronald notes that critics had already begun to question why he wrote so much of one kind of writing instead of focusing on others for which he was better suited. Ronald replies to this criticism:

his best would not have been the good that it is, if he had been other than the man he was—the man to whom no time was less than eternal in its moment, no crowd composed of men not his brothers in need. For the sake of his best

was he to refuse them what here and now was their best? That he would do, and not leave this undone. (36-37)

Ronald recognized that his father wrote with a purpose. He calls him “one of the endless chain of the interpreters of God to man” and argues that “never losing sight of his privilege and duty of interpretation, he would, all his life, use the best means in his reach and judgment to achieve each separate stage of his over-ruling purpose” (31). That Ronald saw a need to defend his father’s work as a body, and the central message holding that body together, indicates that even at this early date, the unity and cohesiveness of MacDonald’s oeuvre was already under attack.⁴

By 1924, the centenary of his birth, another of MacDonald’s sons, Greville, acknowledged that “many of George MacDonald’s novels failed to hold the place once given them” (374). In the introduction to Greville’s biography, G.K. Chesterton praises MacDonald as one of “the many men of genius Scotland produced in the nineteenth century” (14) and credits him with having a significant influence on his own development (9). At the same time, he writes:

In noting that he may well have this place in history in the sense of religious and of national history, I make no attempt here to fix his place in literature. He is in any case one of the kind that it is most difficult to fix. He wrote nothing empty; but he wrote much that is rather too full, and of which the appreciation depends rather on a sympathy with the substance than on the first sight of the form. (15)

Chesterton acknowledges MacDonald’s merits as a thinker and theologian, but he discredits his merits as a writer. He is a man of ideas, not of particular literary talent.

In 1946, what is probably the single most influential work written about MacDonald

⁴ Interestingly, Ronald considers MacDonald’s poetry to be his best, rather than either his fantasy or non-fantasy prose (33-34).

appeared. It was the preface to C.S. Lewis's anthology of MacDonald selections, and it set the direction in which MacDonald studies would develop, reverberating still today, sixty-five years later. Lewis credited MacDonald with starting him on the path to Christianity (xxxvii-xxxix). In his preface, he asserts that "[w]hat [MacDonald] does best is fantasy—fantasy that hovers between the allegorical and the mythopoeic. And this, in my opinion, he does better than any man" (xxix). Referring to MacDonald's myth-making abilities, he describes MacDonald as "the greatest genius of this kind whom I know" (xxxi). This remains the general critical consensus of MacDonald's fantasy writing. Lewis's comments on MacDonald's novels have been equally influential, though in a different direction. He states that "[i]f we define Literature as an art whose medium is words, then certainly MacDonald has no place in its first rank—perhaps not even in its second" (xxviii). Although he does acknowledge that "any reader who loves holiness and loves MacDonald—yet perhaps he will need to love Scotland too—can find even in the worst of them something that disarms criticism and will come to feel a queer, awkward charm even in their very faults," he still maintains that "few of his novels are good and none is very good" (xxxiii). According to Lewis, MacDonald's non-fantasies were essentially worthless from a literary perspective. Subsequent critics have built upon Lewis's words, praising MacDonald's fantasy and denigrating or disregarding his other works, to the extent where his non-fantasy novels have been relatively ignored.

Since Lewis's preface, there has been a revival of interest in MacDonald's work.⁵ Following Lewis's lead, much of that interest has focused on MacDonald's fantasies. Robert Wolff's *The Golden Key* (1961) is the first book-length study of MacDonald's work. It is an attempt at a sustained Freudian reading of MacDonald, heavily emphasizing

⁵ Richard Reis (1992) dates this revival to 1954, to the publication of an edition of *Phantastes* and *Lilith* with an introduction by W.H. Auden and to his own decision to do his doctoral studies on MacDonald, which, he claims, led Robert Wolff to attempt to "beat [him] to the punch" ("Dating the Revival" 20). While Reis's claims of personal responsibility are debatable, it does seem clear that interest in MacDonald was reviving in the late 1940s and early 1950s.

MacDonald's symbolism and biography. In it, Wolff sets a pattern for MacDonald scholarship that continues today. Wolff spends the majority of his work on MacDonald's fantasy works, particularly *Phantastes* (1858), *Lilith* (1895), and the shorter fairy tales. Throughout his discussion, Wolff makes it clear that he considers the fantasies vastly superior to the non-fantasy novels; nonetheless, as the non-fantasies represent a weighty percentage of MacDonald's overall output, they cannot be ignored altogether. Consequently, he does include a single chapter that looks at three of MacDonald's novels: *David Elginbrod* (1863), *Alec Forbes of Howglen* (1865), and *Robert Falconer* (1868), claiming them to be representative of the themes and ideas which mark MacDonald's entire career (267). Then, he goes on in another chapter to examine, more broadly, the entire body of non-fantasy novels in relation to his particular interest—in this case, MacDonald's use of Freudian imagery. In the decades which followed Wolff's study, this pattern of focusing individually on the fantasies and treating the non-fantasies as a group was repeated by numerous critics.

Richard Reis's *George MacDonald* (1972), the next major work on MacDonald to appear, likewise draws a clear line between MacDonald's "realistic" (52) and "imaginative" (75) fiction. Unlike Wolff, Reis's study has no clear ideological purpose; it is more of a survey and general introduction to MacDonald's work, and his views on the relative merits of the two areas of MacDonald's works are clear. Of the fantasies, Reis speculates that they "are more likely to achieve permanence—or so it may be hoped" (28). Of the non-fantasy novels, he writes "they are, in the light of history, the ones most assured of permanent and deserved oblivion" (28). He goes on to say that these novels "may be treated collectively, in order to see what is typical of all of them, because they are so very much alike" (52). As Wolff did, Reis chooses a representative novel to examine in some detail (in this case, *Alec Forbes of Howglen*), before abandoning them altogether. He spends the rest of his time

discussing MacDonald's fantasies, ignoring the non-fantasies completely, even when discussing MacDonald's "didactic muse" (125-37). Overall, Reis treats the novels as irrelevant and uninteresting, despite their number. Reis's attitude towards the non-fantasies remained the norm throughout the 1970s,⁶ and like Lewis, Reis's views remain highly influential today.⁷

MacDonald scholarship increased rapidly in the 1980s. In 1982, two important things happened. Rolland Hein's *The Harmony Within: The Spiritual Vision of George MacDonald* was published and *North Wind: The Journal of the George MacDonald Society* first appeared. Hein's book traces MacDonald's religious beliefs and Biblical interpretations as they reflect in his works. Like critics before him, Hein focuses primarily on MacDonald's fantasies, examining "how thoroughly the symbolic terrain of his imaginative prose is shaped by his theological convictions" (xvi). Having traced this through MacDonald's works for children, *Phantastes*, and *Lilith*, Hein turns his attention to the non-fantasies. Rather than consign them to literary "oblivion," however, Hein recognises that MacDonald's "novels are all shaped by artistic techniques directly marshalled for the purposes of faith" (112). Though "MacDonald was first of all a Christian; secondly, an artist," the novels are not without merit—or similarities to the fantasies (113). Hein goes on to identify "[s]everal archetypal images [which] are prominent in both the novels and the fantasies" (116). By recognizing the similar motifs in both types of MacDonald's work, Hein acknowledges that the genres are not as clearly separable as previous critics have indicated. This is an important step forward in MacDonald scholarship.

North Wind has become one of the primary resources for MacDonald scholarship, and as such is a valuable tool for observing trends in that scholarship. A survey of its

⁶ See Stephen Prickett, *Romanticism and Religion* (1976); and Colin Manlove, "George MacDonald's Early Scottish Novels" (1979).

⁷ This will be further developed in subsequent chapters.

contents, however, reveals the same critical split between the fantasies and the non-fantasies. In the first ten years (1982-1991), *North Wind* published fifty essays (including book reviews). Only four look at MacDonald's non-fantasies, and three of those four⁸ treat MacDonald very generally as a novelist, rather than looking in depth at one or more of his works. The fourth, Kathy Triggs's "Images of Creation," which is an in-depth look at *Paul Faber, Surgeon*, appeared in 1987. This essay represents one of the first attempts to actually take a positive look at the artistry of MacDonald's non-fantasies. Triggs states her intention "to look at the way the plot coheres, and, most particularly, at the images which [MacDonald] uses to unify the action and to emphasise his theme" (22). Alongside Triggs's essay in the 1987 volume of *North Wind* is John Pennington's "The George MacDonald Industry: A 'Wolff' in Sheep's Clothing," which examines the abridgements of MacDonald's non-fantasies then appearing in bookshops. Pennington accuses these abridgers, most notably Dan Hamilton and Michael Phillips, of perpetuating and reinforcing a "patronizing attitude toward a second-rate novelist" (which, interestingly, Pennington blames on C.S. Lewis) in an attempt to make money (42). He concludes:

His fairy tales and fantasies have stood the test of time—they are classics in their own right. Such a claim cannot yet be made of his novels, and I'm afraid that these new editions just might turn off future MacDonald scholars. If the goal is to have MacDonald studied more thoroughly, to bring him to the attention of scholars and lay readers, then we certainly need original reprints with scholarly introductions. If his novels don't merit such scrutiny then let them rest in the rare book rooms. But don't apologize for his writing, don't edit his writing and destroy what MacDonald wrote. (44)

Pennington's essay represents a clear snapshot of the situation in MacDonald scholarship in

⁸ Kathy Triggs, "The Poverty of Riches" (1982); Edward Troup's "MacDonald's Use of Scots" (1983, but originally published in 1925); and Georgette Lormant, "A Novelist for All Times" (1985).

1987. The fantasies were widely read and admired; the non-fantasies were not. Even worse, they were very difficult to find in non-abridged forms. The mere existence of the abridgements attests to a widespread attitude toward MacDonald as a writer and artist. Essentially, Pennington issued a call for a re-examination of MacDonald's non-fantasies, in their original forms.⁹

He was not alone. Two important books were published the same year, both of which called for a reassessment and deeper interest in MacDonald. First was William Raeper's biography of MacDonald. As shown above, Raeper observed that critics had been slow to approach MacDonald's work. He hoped that "this detailed study of his life and work, the first since Greville MacDonald's biography in the 1920s, will both generate and stimulate interest in a man whose remarkable spirit and unique view of man has much to tell us today" (*George MacDonald* 7). Raeper maintains a belief that the non-fantasies are of less value than the fantasies overall, calling him merely "a passable mid-Victorian Scottish novelist" or "a theological storyteller" (213). Nonetheless, he does find value in them as "giving expression to the inner workings of the mind and grasping at a dimension of human experience which has been largely ignored or else rejected as indescribable" (213). Also appearing in 1987 was David Robb's *George MacDonald*.¹⁰ Robb's work was the most favorable towards MacDonald's non-fantasies to date. He observes that "the differences between the main types of [MacDonald's] fiction are far less important or real than is usually assumed" (19). Furthermore, Robb argues that the non-fantasy novels "are what

⁹ Interestingly, Pennington does not comment on the two *positive* reviews of these abridgements which appeared in *North Wind*. In 1984, Rachel Johnson expressed hope that the Michael Phillips version of *David Elginbrod* (published as *The Tutor's First Love*) would send readers back to the original, but yet acknowledged that "It is with the best and most positive reasons that [Phillips] undertakes the task and his integrity cannot be questioned" (41). A year later, Kathy Triggs actually goes so far as to say that Dan Hamilton "has also performed a service for those who like their MacDonald 'pure', for he has exposed the bones of the three stories. MacDonald's novels are complex in their interweaving of plot, images and comment, and it can be difficult to determine just how his plots hang together and how they develop as stories" ("Review" 40). That these comments appear in a scholarly journal devoted to the study of MacDonald reveals a great deal about the attitude towards MacDonald.

¹⁰ This was republished in 1989 under the title *God's Fiction*. All citations come from this text.

they are, not (I believe) because of incompetence or because MacDonald did not really want to write them. Instead, they are to be seen as MacDonald's most ambitious, if flawed, attempts to articulate his vision in its full meaning" (25). Nonetheless, Robb concludes that "[a]t first glance, these long novels seem examples of the worst kind of shapeless, self-indulgent Victorian fictional excess. No brief discussion here can dispel that impression; only a sympathetic reading can do that" (42). Robb gives such a sympathetic reading to the novels, but ultimately, once again, focuses his attention primarily on the works of fantasy as MacDonald's greatest "claim on the attention of posterity" (77). Nonetheless, while the fantasies remained ascendant, the late eighties indicated that things might be shifting towards a wider reassessment of MacDonald, one which would bring fresh attention to the rest of MacDonald's oeuvre.¹¹

The following year, 1988, continued this call. Douglas Gifford's *The History of Scottish Literature, Volume 3: The Nineteenth Century* featured another essay by Robb, which notes the general critical preference for MacDonald's fantasies, but argues that "any remotely sympathetic reader of his non-fantasy works will find grounds for doubting the wisdom of complete rejection of this large proportion of MacDonald's life-work" ("Realism and Fantasy" 278). Robb goes on to argue that "[i]t has long been obvious, to those who know and respond to MacDonald's fantasy works, that their author was gifted with a special kind of imagination Consideration of the best of the novels, however, enriches this notion by suggesting that MacDonald's imagination is also fed, vitally and powerfully, by memory" (280). David Robb is one of the few critics actively to engage with the similarities and connections between MacDonald's fantasies and his novels, but Robb is still highly selective in his approach to MacDonald. He bypasses MacDonald's "English"

¹¹ John Docherty (2000) singles out 1987 as a turning point year in MacDonald studies, a year after which there is "no logical justification" for "extreme approaches" to MacDonald ("Limitations" 50). He finds the persistence of those approaches thirteen years later "depressing" (50). Though referring specifically to the attitudes leading to the MacDonald abridgements, his observation is a valid observation of the overall field of MacDonald studies.

novels altogether, and though he notes the similar importance of memory in the fantasies and the non-fantasies, he still treats them as entirely separate genres.

Furthermore, Gifford's volume makes an overall call for a continued reassessment of MacDonald. In his essay on "Nineteenth-Century Non-Fictional Prose," Ian Campbell praises "the finesse with which [MacDonald] approaches questions of fragile belief and uncertain faith" (180) and suggests that MacDonald's "essays on the fantastic imagination, his religious prose works, his criticism, his occasionally splendid realist Scottish fiction all urgently demand reconsideration" (181). Likewise, Gifford's "Myth, Parody and Dissociation: Scottish Fiction 1814-1914" notes the need for a critical reassessment of MacDonald. Gifford observes that his "strange mingling of social realism and symbolic fantasy cannot be fully understood without reference to this Scottish Tradition" (227). Gifford briefly looks at the major fantasies and several of MacDonald's Scottish novels, concluding that there is "a fantastic resonance to the realism, so that the volumes move elusively between recognisable Victorian worlds and those of fabulous imagination this is quite deliberate, and necessitates to my mind a reconsideration of these works as requiring new terms of criticism and reference which won't condemn them as failed realism or failed romance" (229). Instead, MacDonald's works combine elements of realism and romance into a something new which needs to be explored.

Unfortunately, despite these repeated calls, this widespread reassessment never transpired. As the 1980s gave way to the 1990s, MacDonald scholarship continued to grow, but still the fantasies received most of the attention. William Raeper's *The Gold Thread* (1990), the first collection of essays to focus just on MacDonald, shows this continuing trend. The collection does include an essay by Robb, which looks at "George MacDonald's Scottish Novels." In this essay, he argues that MacDonald's Scottish upbringing is reflected in the dozen of his novels which feature Scottish settings. Also in this volume, however, is

an essay on “George MacDonald and C.S. Lewis,” by Catherine Durie, which takes issue with Lewis’s assessment of MacDonald on the grounds that Lewis was speaking, not as a literary critic, but as a seeker of personal religious guidance. Despite this favorable beginning, Durie recognizes no particular merit in MacDonald’s realist novels in themselves, calling “the market for them . . . inexplicable except in terms of the continuing appetite for anything connected with Lewis, however remotely” (163). The rest of the volume focuses exclusively on MacDonald’s fantasies.¹²

Since Raeper’s collection, MacDonald’s novels have slowly gained some ground with critics. More and more critics treat the novels as an integral, if still inferior, part of MacDonald’s oeuvre. Over the last twenty years, a relative handful of articles have appeared looking at the connections between MacDonald’s disparate texts. For example, Daniel Boice’s 1992 article “A Kind of Sacrament: Books and Libraries in the Fiction of George MacDonald” examines the prevalence of libraries in both the realist and fantastic writing of MacDonald. Some articles explore the occasionally fantastic elements in MacDonald’s realist novels. Adrian Gunther (1996) has examined MacDonald’s *Castle Warlock* (1882), and Deirdre Hayward (1996) has looked at *Robert Falconer* (1868). Hal Broome (1994) and Nancy Mellon (1996) have both looked at MacDonald’s *Adela Cathcart* (1864) which uses a traditional Victorian narrative as a frame for several interpolated stories, many of which can be classified as fantasies or fairy tales. John Docherty (2000) has looked at *Thomas Wingfold, Curate* from the angle of abridgment, pointing out how much is lost when MacDonald’s novels are cut. Rebecca Ankeny (1998) has explored how the changes between the serialized and final versions of *The Portent* (1863, 1864) affect the reader’s sense of the supernatural’s role in the story. She has also explored (1996) the role of reading in *Mary Marston*. Adelheid Kegler (2002) has examined *Wilfrid Cumbermede*

¹² The other major collection of essays to appear in the 1990s, Roderick McGillis’s 1992 *For the Childlike: George MacDonald’s Fantasies for Children* also focuses exclusively on the fantasies. However, since that was its intention, as indicated by the title, it cannot be criticized for ignoring the non-fantasies.

(1875) as a representative of the European Symbolist movement and (1996) *Weighed and Wanting* in terms of nineteenth century social ethics. Bonnie Gaarden (2006) has written about *Heather and Snow* (1893), looking at MacDonald's use of characters and how it correlates to that in his fantasies. Still, these few essays continue to be vastly outnumbered by essays focusing on the purely fantastic works. Of the 126 articles appearing in *North Wind* Volumes 11-28 (1992-2009), fewer than twenty have looked at the non-fantasies. The situation has improved, but no widespread reassessment of these works has taken place.

In the last few years, three separate essay collections on MacDonald have appeared, and taken together, they provide a snapshot of the current state of MacDonald criticism. Lucas Harriman's *Lilith in a New Light: Essays on the George MacDonald Fantasy Novel* (2008) focuses on *Lilith*. Understandably, it contains no essays about MacDonald's other novels. Jean Webb's "*A Noble Unrest*": *Contemporary Essays on the Work of George MacDonald* (2007) contains only one brief essay which examines MacDonald's realist novels: David Neuhouser's "George MacDonald and Social Issues," which draws on several of MacDonald's realist novels for his views on poverty, women's rights, and animal rights. The collection's remaining ten essays examine MacDonald's fantasies. The third collection, Roderick McGillis's *George MacDonald: Literary Heritage and Heirs* (2008) features a slightly more balanced interest in MacDonald's overall oeuvre. Most of the essays still address the fantasies. However, the collection opens with Robb's "'Perhaps He Will Need To Love Scotland Too': The Importance of MacDonald's Scottish Sources," which looks generally at MacDonald's immersion in Scottish literature and folklore, as well as his more specific reliance on Sir Thomas Dick Lauder's *Account of the Great Floods of August 1829 in the Province of Mora, and Adjoining Districts* (1830). Neuhouser's "George MacDonald and Universalism" likewise focuses most of its attention on MacDonald's novels, using them to explore MacDonald's unique theological perspective.

My own “Phantastic Parallels in George MacDonald’s *Phantastes* and *St. George and St. Michael*” argues that MacDonald actually recreated the events and lessons of *Phantastes* in a realistic setting in his historical novel *St. George* (1876). Finally, Pennington revisits his earlier examination of MacDonald’s literary and popular reputation in “A ‘Wolff’ in Sheep’s Clothing: The George MacDonald Industry and the Difficult Rehabilitation of a Reputation.” As before, he argues that the abridgments themselves are largely responsible for the conclusions among modern readers about MacDonald’s literary merit. However, twenty years later, this essay ends with hope that the increasing availability of unabridged MacDonald texts will change, and slowly is changing, their perception (254). Overall, McGillis’s book, though still weighted in favor of the fantasies, bears out Pennington’s hope by presenting a more balanced look at MacDonald’s complete body of work.

But still, a full reassessment of MacDonald’s non-fantasies has yet to take place. More work is being done on them, and more critics are recognizing that they have as-yet-undiscussed merits. Lewis’s assertion that “few of his novels are good and none is very good” (xxxiii) is no longer as universally accepted. In fact, though most critics still seem to accept it in general terms, great disagreement exists between critics about the relative strengths of some of MacDonald’s works. This is not restricted to the non-fantasies. Different critics single out different works as MacDonald’s best, even claiming general agreement for their choice. Cynthia Marshall (1989) claims that “‘The Golden Key’ is regularly recognized as George MacDonald’s masterpiece in the fairy tale mode” (“Reading ‘The Golden Key’” 22), while Stephen Prickett (2005) says “By general agreement, *The Princess and the Goblin*, is MacDonald’s most successful fairy story” (*Victorian Fantasy* 163). Sometimes, the same critic cannot make up his or her mind about a single text. For example, in *The Harmony Within* (1982), Rolland Hein claims that *Lilith* “as a whole is an uneven performance in its final form, and somewhat inferior to *Phantastes*” (111). In his

1993 biography of MacDonald, Hein calls *Lilith* his “masterpiece” (*Victorian Mythmaker* 364). Lewis includes *The Wise Woman* in his list of MacDonald’s great works (xxxii), but McGillis says that “only an insensitive reader would attempt to defend this book as completely successful” (“Fantasy as Adventure” 24).

Turning to the non-fantasies, the same situation exists. Critics cannot agree on which books are good and which are bad. *Weighed and Wanting* (1882) has been called both “not a pleasant book to read” (Kegler, “Mariana” 28) and “his greatest novel” (Pridmore, “Spiritual Development” 1). During MacDonald’s lifetime, *Annals of a Quiet Neighbourhood* (1867) was viewed as one of his best works (Greville MacDonald 154). This view was shared by MacDonald’s son Ronald, who listed it as the best of the novels set in England and on par with the best set in Scotland (*From a Northern Window* 64). Yet Hein says that this book (and its sequels) “are among MacDonald’s poorest” (*Harmony Within* 123). MacDonald himself thought *Paul Faber, Surgeon* (1879) was his best novel, although his son says “emphatically it is not so” (Greville MacDonald 353). Hein calls *Wilfrid Cumbermede* (1875) one of “MacDonald’s more successful novels” (*Harmony Within* 120); Timothy Bleeker says that it “do[es] not show MacDonald at his best” (83). This list could continue. The point is, while critics treat MacDonald’s work as if a critical consensus exists, that consensus is more illusory than real. It is no longer enough to justify the relative dismissal of MacDonald’s non-fantasy works simply because a few early critics say they are of little value.

The way has been paved for an in-depth reassessment of MacDonald’s fiction as a body for some time now. It has not yet taken place. This thesis is an attempt at providing that reassessment. Historically, the tendency has been to view MacDonald’s fiction through the lens of modern attitudes towards literature, through modern ideas of what makes “good literature.” However, these ideas have changed dramatically since MacDonald’s lifetime.

To read twentieth and twenty-first century sensibilities into a Victorian context causes important elements to be misunderstood or missed altogether. To fully understand MacDonald's intentions, and judge his success as a literary artist, it is necessary to understand the literary context in which he lived and worked. It is necessary to understand his attitudes towards literature and the imagination, his ideas about the nature of form and content, and the underlying assumptions of reality informing his work. To that end, the first two chapters will explore MacDonald's theories as expressed in his non-fiction essays and sermons. Chapter One will examine MacDonald's theories of the imagination—what it is, how it works, and how it relates to literature. Chapter Two will then look at MacDonald's attitudes towards literary form, as well as exploring the wider literary culture of the Victorian period. What emerges from these two chapters is essentially MacDonald's own theory of the aesthetic as it relates to literature.

From there, the focus turns to MacDonald's theories in action. Traditionally, most critics separate MacDonald's works by genre, looking at them as fantasies and "realist" novels, sometimes further separating the non-fantasies into English and Scottish novels. David Robb has argued that though an imperfect system, "classification makes description of his output easier" (*God's Fiction* 19). It might make description easier, but it also causes the similarities across the genres and the overall unity of MacDonald's oeuvre to disappear into the background. Consequently, Chapters Three, Four, and Five will not divide along genre lines. Instead, each will look at how MacDonald uses a particular literary element across his oeuvre. Chapter Three will examine the wide array of plot elements and incidents occurring throughout the fiction and what they reveal about MacDonald's attitude towards reality and literature. Chapter Four will look at character and the ways MacDonald uses his characters to explore different attitudes towards reality. Finally, Chapter Five will look at MacDonald's overall style, at the way he constructs his stories and the language he

employs. These are the three areas where MacDonald's non-fantasies are routinely lambasted by critics. However, when viewed through the lens of MacDonald's own theories of literature, his choices in these areas reveal the larger plan that ties his entire oeuvre together.

Chapter One

MacDonald and the Imagination

Introduction

To understand the fictional works of George MacDonald, it is important to first understand the thought and ideas behind them. Richard Reis (1972) notes that MacDonald is one of the few artists with a legitimate “claim to significance as *both* an artist and a thinker” (*George MacDonald* 51). Indeed, MacDonald’s two sides are inseparable. His philosophy directs his fiction, and his fiction reflects his philosophy. One of the most relevant and widely discussed aspects of that philosophy involves MacDonald’s view of the imagination. He believed that the world contains much more than is known and understood. There are many things for which the known facts cannot fully account, and reality contains much more than what is commonly called “reality.” He had a strong belief in the supernatural. While he was a student, he “introduce[ed] a debate on the existence of ghosts,” himself taking the side supporting that existence (Raeper, *George MacDonald* 67). He grew up in a family that recognized and accepted strange events: his father, George Sr., reported seeing the figure of his son, John, walking in the dusk days after he was buried (Raeper, *George MacDonald* 156-57). George Jr. maintained a lifelong belief in the “marvelous,” eventually writing *The Miracles of Our Lord* (1870), in which he attested to his belief in Christ’s miracles as actual supernatural events and in an expansive view of reality. Ultimately, he believed in “a transcendent reality [that] is so closely related to the world of immediate human experience that it is also immanent in it” (Hein, *Harmony Within* 113). At the heart of that transcendent reality is a loving God, who created reality and is alone in touch with all aspects of it. For MacDonald, the imagination is the means through which humanity explores that transcendent reality and draws closer to the God at the heart of it.

MacDonald's Theory of the Imagination

MacDonald saw the imagination as inherently rooted in the divine imagination. In his 1867 essay "The Imagination: Its Function and Its Culture," MacDonald states that "[t]he imagination of man is made in the image of the imagination of God" (3). Human beings have imaginations because the God who created humanity had one first. MacDonald calls the imagination the "faculty which gives form to thought" (2), and when applied to God, he means this literally. God thinks, and things exist. He says that "the imagination of God" is "that calling out of nothing" generally called "creation" (3). MacDonald acknowledges that the human consciousness is incapable of ever fully understanding God's because human consciousness is limited, whereas God's is limitless (3). Nonetheless, looking at God's creation gives a clue; while the imaginations of people work within the created world, with things, God's imagination creates the world itself:

We discover at once, for instance, that where a man would make a machine, or a picture, or a book, God makes the man that makes the book, or the picture, or the machine. Would God give us a drama? He makes a Shakespere [sic]. Or would he construct a drama more immediately his own? He begins with the building of the stage itself, and that stage is a world—a universe of worlds. He makes the actors, and they do not act,—they *are* their part. He utters them into the visible to work out their life—his drama Instead of writing his lyrics, he sets his birds and his maidens a-singing. All the processes of the ages are God's science; all the flow of history is his poetry As the thoughts move in the mind of a man, so move the worlds of men and women in the mind of God, and make no confusion there, for there they had their birth, the offspring of his imagination. (3-4)

MacDonald equates the divine imagination with the power that created and continually reshapes the world and the people in it.

The human imagination is a far limited form of the divine imagination. Its primary limitation lies in the human imagination's inability to actually *create* anything, even its own thoughts. As MacDonald says, a person "knew [the thought] not till he found it there, therefore he could not even have sent for it" ("The Imagination" 4). Ultimately, MacDonald argues that the creative process lies with God. Furthermore, MacDonald differentiates between the embodying of thoughts in forms¹³ and the creations of the forms in which to embody those thoughts. The forms exist because God created them; the human imagination merely reveals those existing forms (5). The closest the human imagination gets to a truly creative function is in choosing and finding out new ways to combine those forms to express thought. MacDonald says this "operation is the same as that of the divine inasmuch as it does put thought into form" (7). This is the origin not only of poetry, for MacDonald, but of "every sphere of human activity" (7), for all activity involves the putting of thought into form. As further evidence of this, MacDonald gives "the fact that there is always more in a work of art . . . than the producer himself perceived while he produced it" (25). The human imagination can do much, but it is limited to perceiving, not creating.

Ultimately, MacDonald saw the limitations of the human imagination as indicative of its primary function. Yes, the imagination puts thoughts into forms, but its true function lies in the seeking out of those forms, "[t]o inquire into what God has made" ("The Imagination" 2). MacDonald saw reality as far larger and more complex than just what is visible and known. He believed that no human "revelation can be other than partial . . . for

¹³ In addition to his other influences, MacDonald's recurrent use of the word *forms* suggests echoes of Plato. MacDonald was clearly familiar with Plato, and his works are peppered with references to Plato. For a more detailed look at MacDonald and Plato, see Frank Riga (1992), "The Platonic Imagery of George MacDonald and C. S. Lewis: The Allegory of the Cave Transfigured"; Hugh O'Connor (2003), "George MacDonald's Sources for 'The Golden Key'"; and Fernando Soto (2007), "Unearthing Ancient Sources in MacDonald's 'The Golden Key.'"

what revelation, other than a partial, can the highest spiritual condition receive of the infinite God?" ("Consuming Fire" 23). God is infinite, and consequently, his imagination is infinite. Compared to that infinite imagination, the human imagination is limited, leaving "infinite lands of uncertainty lying all about the sphere hollowed out of the dark by the glimmering lamp of our knowledge" ("The Imagination" 29). Those lands, he argues, are the realm of the imagination, and they can be far more powerful and affecting than the areas in the light. He further argues that "it is not the things we see the most clearly that influence us the most powerfully; undefined, yet vivid visions of something beyond, something which eye has not seen nor ear heard, have far more influence than any logical sequences whereby the same things may be demonstrated by the intellect" (28). MacDonald believed that the mysteries of creation and the Creator were all around him. These are things for which there are no known facts, no explanations, no intellectual understanding. He furthermore believed that exploring these mysteries, whether solving them or not, was a primary means of growing in understanding. The task of searching those "infinite lands of uncertainty" belongs to the imagination, whose primary function is "following and finding out the divine imagination in whose image it was made" (10). In other words, the imagination should guide the individual to the God at the true heart of reality; furthermore, this imaginative guidance should be a cornerstone of faith. Essentially, for MacDonald, the imagination is a necessary part of spiritual growth and understanding.

MacDonald's theory of the imagination is directly related to the theology that informed everything else he wrote. In her book, *Baptized Imagination: The Theology of George MacDonald* (2006), Kerry Dearborn uses MacDonald's theory of the imagination to help clarify the theological position MacDonald takes throughout his fiction, beginning with MacDonald's vision of the nature of God. She identifies five key characteristics of MacDonald's view of the divine imagination. First, the "divine imagination is part of God's

loving nature” because it was that nature that led him to create humanity (72). Second, “divine thought and action” are not separate from each other; they are inherently and integrally connected (72). Third, “God’s imagination expresses radical initiative in creating a world filled with meaning and purpose” (72). Essentially, Dearborn argues, MacDonald saw the world as directed by an involved God with a master plan for his creation. Fourth, God’s imagination allows him to understand “the other” (humanity) and “through imaginative empathy . . . [to] enter into the pain and suffering of [His] creatures” (72). Finally, this imaginative “engagement with people remains consistent with God’s character and thus judgment also is a creative expression of compassion and transforming power” (72). Ultimately, the divine imagination is responsible for everything we see in the world, as well as for the larger purpose and workings that we cannot see. As a product of the divine imagination, the world works together in perfect harmony.

The human imagination, then, is to help people see and take their rightful place in that harmony (MacDonald, “The Imagination” 35). Dearborn claims that MacDonald saw God as “the source for proper imaginative engagement with that meaning” (76). It is only “as the light of God illumines one’s imagination” that “inherent pattern and meaning become accessible to humankind” (80). Consequently, it is the job of the artist to stimulate the imagination in the right direction. To this end, MacDonald’s fiction operates to stimulate the imagination “to inform and transform theology” (Dearborn 95). The imagination can dissolve unhealthy and incorrect doctrines and construct healthy and correct ones (Dearborn 97). Ultimately, Dearborn concludes that MacDonald’s works demonstrate the need for imaginative awakening and offer a means for its accomplishment by conveying, imaginatively, his vision of the truth of humanity’s relationship with God. In the end, however, Dearborn’s goal was not to dwell on “the quality of MacDonald’s literary contribution, but the extent to which his use of the imagination enables him to truthfully and

effectively convey the nature of God as revealed in Jesus Christ, the nature of humans created and re-created in God's image, the role of the imagination, and the nature of the human pilgrimage, both now and eternally" (171). As a result, she looks only briefly at the ways in which MacDonald uses the imagination in his fiction, focusing instead on the theological views MacDonald expresses. While Dearborn's examination of MacDonald's theology is significant as the first extended look at MacDonald's theology and its relation to his theory of the imagination, the full implications and applications of that theory to his fiction remain to be examined.¹⁴

Origin of MacDonald's Ideas

MacDonald's theories of the imagination are a composite, influenced by multiple sources. It has been argued that MacDonald was not much of an original thinker, but that the works of others "should be seen acting on him rather as a dye on cloth – colours merge – echoes of other hues are visible – but the final mix, the colour is MacDonald's own" (Raeper, *George MacDonald* 242). While the full repercussions of this conclusion remain debatable, it is true that elements of MacDonald's views on the imagination have been traced to a number of sources in English Romanticism, German Romanticism, and Mysticism, and considerable disagreement exists among MacDonald scholars as to which had the most influence.

English Romanticism

One of the areas of most agreement among critics is in the influence upon MacDonald of the English Romantics. Jennifer Koopman (2007) argues that MacDonald "was particularly obsessed with Percy Shelley, with whom he seemed to identify" (48). She suggests that MacDonald attempted to "reshap[e] the Romantic poet into an image that is

¹⁴ MacDonald's theories of the imagination have been discussed by numerous critics. For examples, see Richard Reis (1972), *George MacDonald*; Rolland Hein (1982), *Harmony Within*; David Robb (1987), *God's Fiction*; and William Raeper (1987), *George MacDonald* among others. However, the full implications of that theory across the full range of MacDonald's prose have yet to be adequately explored.

much like MacDonald himself” (48). MacDonald did admire Shelley, and references to him appear frequently throughout his fiction. In his criticism, MacDonald tried to defend Shelley against charges of atheism:

As regards his religious opinions, one of the thoughts which most strongly suggest themselves is,—how ill he must have been instructed in the principles of Christianity! . . . So far is he from being an opponent of Christianity properly so called, that one can hardly help feeling what a Christian he would have been, could he but have seen Christianity in any other way than through the traditional and practical misrepresentations of it which surrounded him. (“Shelley” 270-71).

MacDonald’s admiration for Shelley shows his willingness to rethink and redefine well-established ideas and to challenge accepted notions. Despite this admiration, however, Shelley’s direct influence on MacDonald’s theories of the imagination is relatively slight.¹⁵

More significant is the influence of William Blake. MacDonald admired Blake as an artist and a poet. In *England’s Antiphon* (1868), MacDonald hails Blake, along with Wordsworth and Coleridge, as bringers of “The New Vision” (301). He refers to him as “the painter of many strange and fantastic but often powerful—sometimes very beautiful pictures” (301). Of Blake’s poetry, MacDonald says, “[he] wrote poems of an equally remarkable kind. Some of them are as lovely as they are careless, while many present a curious contrast in the apparent incoherence of the simplest language” (301). However, he also notes:

Possibly if he had been sent to an age more capable of understanding him, his genius would not have been tempted to utter itself with such a wildness

¹⁵ Nonetheless, MacDonald’s admiration of Shelley is particularly noteworthy, in comparison with his attitude towards Byron, for whom he did not care at all. In *Alec Forbes of Howglen*, MacDonald depicts “Byron Fever” as something which afflicts the immature and uninformed (207-08). See Chapter Four for more about MacDonald’s view of Byron. He says relatively little of Keats.

as appears to indicate hopeless indifference to being understood. We cannot tell sometimes whether to attribute the bewilderment the poems cause in us to a mysticism run wild, or to regard it as the reflex of madness in the writer.

(301)

Clearly, MacDonald read Blake, and engaged with his ideas. Several critics have argued that Blake influenced aspects of MacDonald's fiction. Richard Reis suggests that some of the imagery in MacDonald's *Phantastes* (1858) was inspired by Blake's *Jerusalem* (George MacDonald 130-31). John Docherty (2008) draws several parallels between images in MacDonald's *Lilith* (1895) and Blake's *Marriage of Heaven and Hell* (1790-93) ("Ambivalent Marriage" 117-22).

However, most of the extended discussions of Blake's influence on MacDonald are limited to the appearance of Blakean imagery in MacDonald's fantasies. Rolland Hein notes that MacDonald's ideas were influenced by Blake (*Harmony Within* 150), but he declines to pursue that influence in any detail. Likewise, Roderick McGillis (2008) makes a passing reference to MacDonald "express[ing] here what Blake termed 'rousing the faculties to act'" ("Fantasy as Miracle" 202). Docherty notes that "MacDonald seems to equate the 'Ideas' Blake mentions here with the products of Coleridgian 'Imagination' which he advocates so passionately in his essay 'The Imagination: Its Function and Its Culture'" ("Ambivalent Marriage" 121).¹⁶ Stephen Prickett (2005), however, points out that Coleridge and Blake interpreted "imagination" differently. For Coleridge, "the imagination was a 'living power' that transformed the elements with which it dealt, shaping them into a new unity" (*Victorian Fantasy* 9); for Blake, it refers to "the power of

¹⁶ Docherty is referring to the following passage in Blake's "Marriage of Heaven and Hell": "It indeed appear'd to Reason as if Desire was cast out, but the Devil's account is, that the Messiah fell, & formed a heaven of what he stole from the Abyss. This is shewn in the Gospel, where he prays to the Father to send the comforter or Desire that Reason may have Ideas to build on, the Jehovah of the Bible being no other than he who dwells in flaming fire" (Plate 5-6). He argues that MacDonald had this image (among others) in mind when writing *Lilith*.

perceiving things that lie beyond the reach of the senses” (26). MacDonald’s insistence that reality is so much more than is readily perceived and that, as discussed before, the imagination’s function is to search those “infinite lands of uncertainty lying all about the sphere hollowed out of the dark by the glimmering lamp of our knowledge” (“The Imagination” 29) seems directly related to Blake’s ideas.¹⁷

Most of the influence of the English Romantics on MacDonald comes from Samuel Taylor Coleridge and, to a lesser extent, William Wordsworth. Prickett (1976) points out that “It is significant that many of the links George MacDonald is quick to stress in his essays are with Wordsworth and Coleridge. There may well be good reason for this. MacDonald *needed* the tradition of these two poets in a way that he did not need that of even the other mystics on whom he so plainly and unashamedly drew – such as Blake” (*Romanticism and Religion* 247). MacDonald wrote of Coleridge that “more than any man in our times, he has opened the eyes of the English people to see wonderful things” (*England’s Antiphon* 307). Prickett claims that MacDonald’s understanding of “symbol” was directly influenced by Coleridge’s, and that “MacDonald’s close adherence to Coleridge on the nature of a symbol is crucial, for what Coleridge’s theory pre-supposes the essential *polarity* of human experience: the existence of ‘two worlds’” (*Romanticism and Religion* 231). Dearborn develops MacDonald’s use of “polarity” in more detail: “differing realities do not necessarily oppose, negate, or absorb each other, or stand in logical abstraction as in the case of paradox. Rather they may enhance each other and the dynamic between them becomes a third reality – a process of interrelationship and interdependence” (31). Furthermore, MacDonald agreed with Coleridge in “embrac[ing] the imagination as that which makes apprehension of polarity possible” (Dearborn 33).

However, MacDonald did not simply take Coleridge’s ideas exactly as they were.

¹⁷ Unfortunately, no one has done a thorough study of the relationship between MacDonald and Blake, nor is there space to adequately explore that relationship here.

David Robb (1987) explains:

MacDonald is even more extreme and explicit than Coleridge in underlining the divine source of [the imagination]. Where, for Coleridge, the primary imagination was ‘a repetition in the finite mind of the eternal act of creation in the infinite I AM’, and the secondary imagination a power seeking unity and striving to enliven that which is dead, MacDonald displaces the notion of mere resemblance to God with that of identity with God Coleridge’s notion of the imagination as the faculty of perception is profound enough, but MacDonald goes even further in identifying it with that which is divine in us. (*God’s Fiction* 53-54)

Regardless of MacDonald’s additions to and alterations of Coleridge’s ideas, it cannot be denied that Coleridge’s ideas were highly influential on MacDonald.

Wordsworth may be of slightly less influence than Coleridge on MacDonald’s theories of the imagination, but he definitely contributes to MacDonald’s view of life. Jim Prothero (1998) claims that “MacDonald got out of Wordsworth: the sense that though this present world is full of splendor, splendor exists somehow beyond. And furthermore, this splendor is and will be in spite of every human pain and misery of this age” (36). Dearborn notes that “MacDonald saw Wordsworth holding together God’s transcendence and immanence in a way that impacted both thought and feeling” and that the “interrelatedness of humanity, nature, and God, evident in Wordsworth’s perspective, permeates MacDonald’s writing” (37). Prickett suggests that MacDonald “was perhaps the first Victorian critic to point out that this contradiction in Wordsworth mirrored the classic Christian paradox of God as *both* immanent in Nature and transcendent over and beyond it” (*Victorian Fantasy* 149). Elsewhere, Prickett explains this further:

Are there, in fact, cases where our experience *can* only be described by a

paradox so audacious as to break open the accepted logical and visual categories? Is Wordsworth simply muddled and naïve, or is he concerned with a similar kind of paradox? One Victorian critic who believed so was George MacDonald Poetry is, for MacDonald, a *theological* instrument: a means of vision whereby opposites may be held simultaneously in focus The ambiguity in Wordsworth's appreciation of Nature is never free from this theological tension. His sense of transcendence co-exists with its opposite, an ever-present possibility of Naturalism. (*Romanticism and Religion* 86-87)

It is easy to see the roots of MacDonald's philosophy here. MacDonald took elements from each of these Romantic poets, merging and transforming them into his own composite theory of the imagination as something God-given and God-centred, designed to reach out into the regions unknown to the senses, to see the wonder inherent in Creation, and to understand better the relationship between Creator and created.

German Romanticism

The second major set of influences on MacDonald's theories comes from German Romanticism. There is widespread critical agreement on MacDonald's interest in this movement, supported by, among other things, MacDonald's inclusion of a long passage from Novalis at the beginning of *Phantastes* (12), and by MacDonald's own translations of Novalis, Schiller, Goethe, and others (*Rampoli*, all). MacDonald first encountered these authors during his time as a student.¹⁸ They appealed to MacDonald because, as Hein

¹⁸ It has been widely assumed by scholars that he first read these authors while cataloging a nobleman's library somewhere in the north of Scotland. However, there is no actual evidence to support that this experience took place. Rolland Hein (1993) makes a strong argument that this is a case of speculation on the part of MacDonald's son and biographer Greville MacDonald, based on a scene in *Alec Forbes of Howglen*, that has taken on a life of its own and become accepted as fact, despite evidence to the contrary. Hein notes that MacDonald made no reference to such an experience when applying for a librarian position in Manchester; furthermore, in a letter, MacDonald indicated scant familiarity with Scottish castles (*Victorian Mythmaker* 554-55).

suggests:

They were convinced that all things are related and that the universe is characterized by a pervading unity, a unity discoverable to man's reason governed by his intuition. They were much concerned that a man's reason be viewed in light of his total being rather than allowed to become his controlling faculty, discrediting the imagination and destroying man's spirit.

(*Harmony Within* 7)

In addition, they believed "truth was first received by the imagination and the intuition, and then rationally apprehended" (Hein, *Harmony Within* 149). Given MacDonald's views as already discussed, it is easy to see what MacDonald found appealing in this philosophy.

Timothy Bleeker (1990) suggests that one of the things which drew MacDonald to the German Romantics was their "more pervasive, extreme emphasis on the supernatural and paranatural" (31). In particular, Bleeker looks at the work of E.T.A. Hoffmann, whose use of the supernatural, he claims, "fascinated" MacDonald (32). Digging deeper into this influence, Raphael Shaberman (1988) isolates eight features of Hoffmann's works that affected MacDonald: the "Use of actual locations," an "Intimate author/reader relationship," the "Deliberate use of ambiguity," the "Use of the fairy tale as a vehicle for personal expression, transforming it into psychological fantasy," the "multi-dimensional, in which two dimensions, differing in time and place, are superimposed," the "invention of new literary forms," the "Revelation of the Unconscious and its formidable power," and the "omnipotence of Child-Vision" (31-33). Each of these factors appears in MacDonald's oeuvre in various ways. Most notable is the expansive, rather than limiting, view of reality that emerges here and its potential role in literature. This expansiveness was a key element in MacDonald's vision of the universe.

Other German authors influenced MacDonald as well. Raeper highlights "Schelling,

the Schlegels, Fichte (whose idealism MacDonald was particularly attracted to), Kant, and Schleiermacher, whose notions of religious experience MacDonald found very attractive” (*George MacDonald* 239-40). William Webb (1995) points to MacDonald’s strong affinity for Jean Paul Richter (65), in particular Richter’s use of dreams (66) and vision of “the open air as a release from various prisons or restricting conditions—some kind of flight towards the divine” (69). However, the German Romantic with the strongest influence on MacDonald was arguably Friedrich von Hardenberg, better known as Novalis. MacDonald was particularly drawn to the works of Novalis, publishing his own translation of the *Spiritual Songs* with his own money, fully aware that it would never be a big seller (Raeper, *George MacDonald* 108).

Nonetheless, the ideas of Novalis appealed to MacDonald. They shared the view that “all people have something of the poet or artist in them, and all, whether in this life or not, will eventually realize their potential” (Bleeker 33). They had similar views on education and the importance of art in education (Schrock 58-76). MacDonald also got from Novalis “a true feeling for death – for Good Death, for Death as a friend” (Moynihan 36). Hein claims that “MacDonald found in Novalis compelling expression of some ideas that he strongly held: that nature is a universal metaphor of the spirit, a ‘garment of God’; that the spirit of virtue and the spirit of poetry are one and the same; and that true poetry is itself a means whereby people may participate in the higher spiritual world” (*Victorian Mythmaker* 126). Raeper explains:

Novalis’s poetic philosophy was one MacDonald reveled in, and he found that it fitted his own mind exactly. ‘We are closer to things invisible than to things visible,’ wrote Novalis, and his belief that the heart was the key to the world and life itself, and that all men and women were on a journey Homeward, had the right mixture of comfort and transcendence for

MacDonald's restless and uneasy spirit. (*George MacDonald* 240)

It does seem that Novalis "was to MacDonald much as Virgil was to Dante in *The Divine Comedy*" (Raeper, *George MacDonald* 240). Along with the other German Romantics, Novalis provided MacDonald an entry into a different sphere of reality, one that would become a trademark of his writing.

Mysticism

The third major influence on MacDonald's theories of the imagination comes from the realm of mysticism. Raeper claims that MacDonald "immers[ed] himself in mystic and mysterious writers," particularly Swedenborg and Boehme (*George MacDonald* 73), and he applied his understanding of them to his views of the imagination. Writing about MacDonald's interest in Boehme, both Dale Nelson (1989) and Deirdre Hayward (1999) note key themes in Boehme's work that manifest in MacDonald's works. Most notably, MacDonald took from Boehme the idea of Nature as a manifestation of God's character and as a means through which humanity can see God (Nelson 29-34; Hayward, "*David Elginbrod* and *Aurora*" 34). From Swedenborg he took "the idea [of] a total correspondence between the natural world and the spiritual world, making it logically fruitful to draw spiritual lessons—as MacDonald often does in his fiction—from close observations of nature" (Bleeker 22). These ideas easily fit in with MacDonald's view of God and reality.

MacDonald was particularly interested in what he saw as the relationship between the mystics and the New Testament. He says that the mystics were "in closest sympathy with the deeper forms of truth employed by St. Paul and St. John" (*England's Antiphon* 231). In his *Unspoken Sermons*, MacDonald discusses the mysticism of the New Testament, noting "a certain mode of embodying truth, common, in various degrees, to almost all, if not all, the writers of the New Testament" ("New Name" 67). He explains that

a “mystical mind is one which, having perceived that the highest expression of which the truth admits, lies in the symbolism of nature and the human customs that result from human necessities, prosecutes thought about truth so embodied by dealing with the symbols themselves after logical forms” (“New Name” 67). In a later sermon, he further elaborates, looking specifically at St. Paul:

What has been called his mysticism is at one time the exercise of a power of seeing, as by spiritual refraction, truths that had not, perhaps have not yet, risen above the human horizon; at another, the result of a wide-eyed habit of noting the analogies and correspondences between the concentric regions of creation; it is the working of a poetic imagination divinely alive, whose part is to foresee and welcome approaching truth; to discover the same principle in things that look unlike; to embody things discovered, in forms and symbols heretofore unused, and so present to other minds the deeper truths to which those forms and symbols owe their being. (“Mirrors of the Lord” 448)

In relation to his views on the imagination, it is clear that, for MacDonald, mysticism involved an active looking for things not readily apparent, for connections between unrelated things, and for the hidden truths all around through “the working of a poetic imagination divinely alive” (“Mirrors of the Lord” 448). Mysticism opened the mind to the unseen realities he believed existed beyond the realm of immediate perception.

However, he cautions that mysticism is also dangerous. In *England’s Antiphon*, MacDonald explains what he admires (and fears) about the mystic poets:

The very essence of these mystical writers seems to me to be poetry. They use the largest figures for the largest spiritual ideas—*light* for *good*, *darkness* for *evil*. Such symbols are the true bodies of the true ideas. For this service mainly what we term *nature* was called into being, namely, to furnish forms

for truths, for without form truth cannot be uttered. Having found their symbols, these writers next proceed to use them logically; and here begins the peculiar danger. When the logic leaves the poetry behind, it grows first presumptuous, then hard, then narrow and untrue to the original breadth of the symbol; the glory of the symbol vanishes; and the final result is a worship of the symbol, which has withered into an apple of Sodom. Witness some of the writings of the European master of the order—Swedenborg: the highest of them are rich in truth; the lowest are poverty-stricken indeed.

(232)

MacDonald was deeply interested in the truths that lie beneath the obvious, visible surface, in the reality that exists beyond the immediate sphere of existence. He viewed mysticism as one path to those truths, as long as the mystic remains focused on Truth. Taken together, the ideas of the English and German Romantics and the mystics (many of which overlapped) form the basis for much of MacDonald's thought.

The Imagination in Practice

MacDonald's writings clearly show that he held a broader view of reality than many people. MacDonald valued the mystery, the unknown, because of the possibilities it offered and the scope it provided for the imagination. He found it easy to accept the possibility of marvelous events. In *Miracles of Our Lord*, he writes that "it needs no great power of faith to believe in the miracles" ("Introduction" 233). On the question of the existence of demons, he acknowledges that he does not *know*, but that "Perhaps if the marvellous, as such, were to me more difficult of belief, anything I might have to say on the side of it would have greater weight. But to me the marvellous is not therefore incredible" ("The Casting Out of Devils" 349). For MacDonald, the marvelous was just as real as the tangible.

However, he knew that this was not always a view shared by his contemporaries. He did not struggle to believe in the miracles or the existence of beings we cannot see, but he knew that others did. He acknowledges that “There are some, I think, who would perhaps find it more possible to accept the New Testament story if the miracles did not stand in the way” (“Introduction” 235). Looking around, he would have seen that “British Evangelicalism tended to be a stern and rigid affair. For all that may be said in its behalf, much of it was unduly narrow and austere in tone and attitude. Reformation rationalism had come to lack the joyous celebration of mystery” (Hein, *Christian Mythmakers* 66). Moreover, as the nineteenth century progressed, advances in science explained away many wonders, and created a rise in “the conviction that science offers the only viable way of thinking correctly about human affairs” (Dale 11). MacDonald saw this view as inherently dangerous. He believed that “To cease to wonder is to fall plumb-down from the childlike to the commonplace—the most undivine of all moods intellectual. Our nature can never be at home among things that are not wonderful to us” (“Jesus in the World” 59). Losing the wonder meant losing something fundamental to human wholeness. MacDonald wanted to put the wonder back into life.

For MacDonald, a lack of wonder is a sign of wrong thinking about life. He suggests that, for people who struggle to believe in the miracles:

perhaps, again, it would be easier for them, to accept both if they could once look into the true heart of these miracles. So long as they regard only the surface of them, they will, most likely, see in them only a violation of the laws of nature: when they behold the heart of them, they will recognize there at least a possible fulfillment of her deepest laws. (“Introduction” 235-36)

MacDonald believed that viewing only the surface of anything yielded an incomplete picture. He claimed that “the deepest man can utter, will be but the type or symbol of a

something deeper yet, of which he can perceive only a doubtful glimmer” (*England’s Antiphon* 257). In the case of the miracles, he argues that their true nature is that they are “an epitome of God’s processes in nature beheld in immediate connection with their source,” God’s natural work sped up and concentrated and produced “in miniature” (“Introduction” 234-35). Unfortunately, many people could not (or would not) see beyond the surface to that deeper meaning.

The problem was a mentality that was content with commonplace ways of thinking. For MacDonald, this commonplace attitude towards life was one of the most serious problems facing society. It was invariably a false way of seeing things because “[i]n the very nature of divine things, the common-place must be false. The stupid, self-satisfied soul, which cannot know its own stupidity, and will not trouble itself either to understand or to imagine, is the farthest behind of all the backward children in God's nursery” (“The Hope of the Universe” 203). Moreover, commonplace thinking is actively destructive. MacDonald calls it “The destroying spirit, who works in the commonplace,” who “is ever covering the deep and clouding the high. For those who listen to that spirit great things cannot be. Such are there, but they cannot see them, for in themselves they do not aspire” (“The Beginning of Miracles” 245-46). Commonplace thinking breeds more commonplace thinking. Refusing to see beyond the surfaces of things eventually disables one’s ability to see the “great things” that exist in reality.

Nor is it just the “great things” that commonplace thinking hides. The marvel present in seemingly simple and common things is also hidden. Remarking on the feelings he imagined in the people who had their sight miraculously restored by Christ, MacDonald writes:

The remark will sound feeble and far-fetched to the man whose familiar spirit is that Mephistopheles of the commonplace. He who uses his vision

only for the care of his body or the indulgence of his mind—how should he understand the gift of God in its marvel? But the man upon whose soul the grandeur and glory of the heavens and the earth and the sea and the fountains of waters have once arisen will understand what a divine *invention*, what a mighty gift of God is this very common thing—these eyes to see with—that light which enlightens the world, this sight which is the result of both.

(“Miracles of Healing Unsolicited” 281-82)

Becoming mired in the commonplace, which MacDonald saw happening all around him, damages a person. It separates him/her from the wonder of creation, from the beauty of the visible world and the possibilities of the invisible, and it keeps them from moving forward and aspiring after greater things. It is dangerous. Even MacDonald’s choice of words underscores this danger. He calls it a “destroying spirit,” a “familiar spirit,” and “the Mephistopheles of the commonplace.” These words invoke images of evil. For MacDonald, a commonplace attitude was very, very bad.

MacDonald’s wariness of commonplace thinking should not be misinterpreted as antagonism towards science. Because of his interest in the imagination and his writings of fantasy, MacDonald has been accused by his critics of being opposed to scientific inquiry and intellectual analysis. Colin Manlove (1990) called him “hostile to science, which he felt gave only a reductive and schematic view of life” (“MacDonald and Kingsley” 147). Hein argues that MacDonald felt that “intellectual analysis alone tends to leave the spirit emaciated, not strengthened” (*Harmony Within* 55). While it is true that MacDonald believed that the imagination was a vital and necessary aspect of life, he never rejects scientific inquiry. In fact, his writing shows a deep interest in science and the exploration of the natural world. At a time when new and rapid advances in science and technology were challenging the very foundations of life and belief, MacDonald found it relatively easy to

adapt to the changes (Fink 59). For example, in his essay on “The Imagination,” MacDonald expresses admiration of the work going on in palaeontology at the time (15), and his works demonstrate a “comfortable attitude toward the ideas of an old earth and creation by evolution” (Fink 62). Likewise, his works uniformly reveal a deep knowledge of and interest in the workings of the natural world.

MacDonald strongly felt that scientific inquiry (as do all fields of inquiry when rightly applied) belongs to God’s plan for revealing himself to humanity. He writes that “there is no fact of science not yet incorporated in a law, no law of science that has got beyond the hypothetic and tentative, that has not in it the will of God, and therefore may not reveal God; but neither fact nor law is there for the sake of fact or law; each is but a mean to an end; in the perfected end we find the intent, and there God” (“The Truth” 464). He further addresses the question of seeming aberrations in those laws, such as Christ’s miracles:

If one should say: ‘The laws of God ought to admit of no change,’ I answer: The same working of unalterable laws might under new circumstances *look* a breach of those laws. That God will never alter his laws, I fully admit and uphold, for they are the outcome of his truth and fact; but that he might not act in ways unrecognizable by us as consistent with those laws, I have yet to see reason ere I believe. Why should his perfect will be limited by our understanding of that will? (“The Government of Nature” 416).

Things that seem not to fit into the laws of nature, as currently understood, are there so that people will push further and dig deeper to understand more of God’s Creation. Each new scientific discovery reveals more of God’s design.

Just as science, in its small way reveals God in the very existence of its laws, it also reveals new avenues of discovery and inquiry to the imagination. He believed that science

without imagination was inherently incomplete and could not do what it claimed to do. He poses the hypothetical question from those who disagree: “But how can the imagination have anything to do with science? That region, at least, is governed by fixed laws” (“The Imagination” 11). To this, he answers “True . . . But how much do we know of these laws? How much of science already belongs to the region of the ascertained—in other words, has been conquered by the intellect? We will not now dispute your vindication of the *ascertained* from the intrusion of the imagination; but we do claim for it all the undiscovered, all the unexplored” (11). He goes on to argue that while observation, the by-word for MacDonald’s unimaginative scientists, might “[show] you the experiments which *ought* to be made, will observation reveal to you which experiments *might* be made?” (12). He even goes so far as to make the positive statement that “the construction of any hypothesis whatever is the work of the imagination” (13). MacDonald never disputes the importance of the intellect or of the known facts: “What can be known must be known severely,” he says (29). But it is through the imagination that new facts are discovered, and those facts, once known, further push the imagination to seek “higher and yet higher laws in those facts” (2).

Science was very important to MacDonald. Rightly viewed, it is the opposite of commonplace thinking because it reaches out into the unknown to see what is out there. Still, he recognized the importance of balancing scientific inquiry with a healthy dose of imagination. Science for the sake of science posed certain dangers. He cautions:

A supreme regard for science, and the worship of power, go hand in hand: that knowledge is power has been esteemed the grandest incitement to study When science, isolated and glorified, has produced a contempt, not only for vulgar errors, but for the truths which are incapable of scientific proof, then, as we see in the French Revolution, the wild beast in man breaks from

its den, and chaos returns. (*England's Antiphon* 303)

Any system which seeks to suppress the imaginative faculty ultimately prevents itself from discovering any new facts. It also runs the risk of developing too high a regard for its own processes and conclusions, to the exclusion of anything that cannot be scientifically ascertained.

Therein lies the key to MacDonald's attitude towards science, and towards intellectual inquiry in general. He recognized that science reveals facts about the working of nature, and he believed that those facts should be "known severely" ("The Imagination" 29). But more than this, he recognized that for every idea that can be scientifically determined as fact, there exist an infinite number of ideas that cannot be. These ideas are the realm of the imagination, which was given by God for the purpose of searching him out, and it is not only the right, but the duty, of the imagination to explore this realm. For it is through the imagination, rather than the intellect, that the highest truths of existence are revealed.

Unfortunately, MacDonald feared that the imagination was too often being suppressed, rejected, or ignored by people, including many within Christian leadership. It was seen "as a dangerous and disagreeable thing" (Raeper, *George MacDonald* 114). MacDonald discusses this further in his *Unspoken Sermons* (1867-89). He begins by describing a child, coming to his teacher "with some outburst of unusual feeling, some scintillation of a lively hope, some wide-reaching imagination that draws into the circle of religious theory the world of nature, and the yet wider world of humanity, for to the child the doings of the Father fill the spaces" ("Higher Faith" 34) only to have his excitement doused by being told that "God has said nothing about that in his word, therefore we have no right to believe anything about it. It is better not to speculate on such matters. However desirable it may seem to us, we have nothing to do with it. It is not revealed" (34).

MacDonald paints this as the standard view of the “dull disciples” who have never allowed their imaginations to search into the mysteries of creation and the Creator, who view the Bible as the only word of God, rather than as “*a* Word of God” (“Temptation” 95). But MacDonald argues that there are “a thousand questions . . . to which the Bible does not even allude” (“Higher Faith” 35), questions which must be answered if there is to be any “peace of mind” (35). These questions have been placed in the human heart by God to encourage the human imagination to reach out to Him (35), to “fall in with the perfect imagination of the Father” (“Creation in Christ” 432). And the answers to these questions come “not to his intellect; [but] to the revealing, God-like imagination in the man, and to no logical faculty whatever” (“Voice of Job” 350). If the imagination is rejected, mankind’s knowledge of God cannot grow as it should.

Nor were Christian leaders the only ones discouraging imagination. Leaders in Victorian education had concluded “that children finally had grown out of the absurd and marvellous tales of heroes and giants and dragons and talking animals It was felt that a new and more glorious era had begun in which the young would be educated and improved through their reading, reasoned into sensible and upright behaviour through moral tales, and filled with useful information” (Avery 126). Consequently, this movement placed emphasis on facts, on what is known (“The Imagination” 2), and is famously depicted (in an extreme form) in Charles Dickens’s *Hard Times* (1854):

‘You are to be in all things regulated and governed,’ said the gentleman, ‘by fact. We hope to have, before long, a board of fact, composed of commissioners of fact, who will force the people to be a people of fact, and of nothing but fact. You must discard the word Fancy altogether. You have nothing to do with it. You are not to have, in any object of use or ornament, what would be a contradiction in fact’ (7).

This approach was not without its opponents, among them Dickens, whose depiction of this system in *Hard Times* is a protest against it; nonetheless, it was widely accepted and practiced.

MacDonald felt that such an approach was both incomplete and ultimately dangerous. When the imagination is so suppressed, the consequences for the individual are severe. He does not deny that the imagination can produce “evil” when allowed to run wild, but he insists that “infinitely worse evils would be the result of its absence” (“The Imagination” 26). MacDonald argues, “Kill that whence spring the crude fancies and wild day-dreams of the young, and you will never lead them beyond dull facts—dull because their relations to each other, and the one life that works in them all, must remain undiscovered” (27). The results of this dullness are equally severe: “[s]elfishness, avarice, sensuality, cruelty, would flourish tenfold; and the power of Satan would be well established ere some children had begun to choose” (26). The imagination is the faculty which turns one’s attention outward from oneself. Ideally, it draws one to the ultimate other, God, but even in limited form, if it can draw one’s attention to the great world, visible and invisible, around him, it allows for growth and development beyond dullness and complacency. This dullness and complacency are responsible for more of society’s problems, in MacDonald’s view, than conscious evil. Self-centeredness and vice come as the result of an inward-turned consciousness. The remedy is simple: “Seek not that your sons and your daughters should not see visions, should not dream dreams; seek that they should see true visions, that they should dream noble dreams. Such out-going of the imagination is one with aspiration, and will do more to elevate above what is low and vile than all possible inculcations of morality” (30). Turning one’s consciousness outward towards God and one’s neighbor, through the imagination, is what people need to do.

Furthermore, MacDonald believed that it was impossible to fully suppress the

imagination. He argues that “if the whole power of pedantry should rise against her, the imagination will yet work; and if not for good, then for evil; if not for truth, then for falsehood; if not for life, then for death; the evil alternative becoming the more likely from the unnatural treatment she has experienced from those who ought to have fostered her” (“The Imagination” 29). Far better than suppressing the imagination, MacDonald contends, is training it to flow in the proper channels, and to strike a healthy balance between intellect and imagination.

MacDonald never pretends that this balance is easy to find. In his essay “A Sketch of Individual Development” (1880), MacDonald traces a hypothetical person from birth through childhood, youth, and adulthood, through various stages of interest, faith, doubt, and spiritual reawakening. As he passes through different stages, MacDonald demonstrates the ever changing relationship between imagination and intellect, and the struggles that imbalance causes. As a child, MacDonald’s boy “is full of unrest. He must know what lies on the farther shore of every river, see how the world looks from every hill: *What is behind? What is beyond?* is his constant cry” (“Sketch” 49). This child is in the early stages of imaginative development; he is curious about and seeking that which is beyond him. Within a few years, however, he discovers science, and “his intellect is seized and possessed by a new spirit. For a time, knowledge is pride; the mere consciousness of knowing is the reward of the labour” (50). But this soon proves to be a hollow pride, and he finds that he has lost his sense of the poetry of life and cannot recover it (51). By allowing the intellect to become everything to him, his imagination has become stunted. It reawakens when he falls in love, and “he forgets himself for a time, and many a glimpse of strange truth finds its way through his windows” (54). Looking outward once again, rather than inward at the pride of knowledge, his imagination becomes once again ascendant. As the initial excitement of falling in love fades somewhat, he strikes a tenuous balance, able to

“decry the indwelling poetry of science” (55) and to imaginatively see the great wonders existing beyond science.

But the balance does not hold. The man’s imagination has not yet found its proper channel, and the dullness and commonplaceness of “reality” rush in on him again. His inability to connect with the transcendent reality causes him to fear the approach of death because he can see nothing waiting beyond. The only thing which keeps him sane is occasionally seeing the wonder of the universe “ever reappearing through the vapours of question[s]” which arise from his imagination, searching the unknown (56-57). He struggles to avoid falling into “the dull level of the commonplace” around him because such a life “is not worth living” (58). He tries to keep away from “the killing power of a godless science” (60). These struggles represent the battle between intellect and imagination waging within him, the battle between seeing only this world and seeing beyond this world to the God at the center of everything. The man finds peace only when he opens himself to the mysteries of the Eternal and begins to seek it (65-68), drawn on by the “grand auroral hope about the idea” (71), with his imagination “enliven[ed]” by “the belief in a live Ideal, at the heart of all personality, as of every law” (75). It is only when he allows his intellect to work with his imagination, turned in the proper direction—“to inquire into what God has made” (“The Imagination” 2)—that he discovers his path. Though MacDonald is more interested in tracing his hypothetical man’s spiritual development, and in showing the importance of obedience to the words of Christ (“Sketch” 74), his narrative sheds light on the struggle to find that balance between intellect and imagination.

MacDonald’s “Sketch” demonstrates the problems of an improperly trained imagination, one that was not taught to seek the “live Ideal” from the start (75). His “Imagination” includes a plan for correctly training the imagination. “The best beginning,” he writes, “is an acquaintance with nature, in which let [a child] be encouraged to observe

vital phenomena, to put things together, to speculate from what he sees to what he does not see” (37). Nature is full of mysteries, and teaching a young child to appreciate those mysteries and to try to see beyond what is purely visible will set him on the right track. However, MacDonald recognized that such immersion in nature was becoming more difficult in an increasingly industrial and urbanized culture. Under such circumstances, he directs people to read books:

In books, we not only have store of all the results of the imagination, but in them, as in her workshop, we may behold her embodying before our very eyes, in music of speech, in wonder of words, till her work, like a golden dish set with shining jewels, and adorned by the hands of the cunning workmen, stands finished before us the finest products of the imagination are of the best nourishment for the beginnings of that imagination. (“The Imagination” 37-38).

Reading stimulates the imagination. It gives the imagination new ground for exploration, presents new possibilities and new ideas that readers may not have discovered on their own. Furthermore, MacDonald advocates reading because the reader can see not only the finished product of the imagination’s work, but also can see the imagination in action as the story develops, both on the page, and in the mind of the reader. Seeing how writers put their ideas into form and give shape to the inner workings of their brains provides a model for the reader of how this is done. And the more completely a work demonstrates the imagination’s workings, the better it will feed the imagination of its readers.

MacDonald did not, however, advocate “indiscriminate reading” (“The Imagination” 39). He carefully warns people away from books that “might tend to lower [their] reference, [their] choice, or [their] standard” (39). It becomes important, therefore, to consider what MacDonald classified as a good book. It is customary, at this point, for

MacDonald critics to skip the rest of MacDonald's literary criticism and jump ahead to his essay "The Fantastic Imagination" (1893). This is a valid place to start, as it does address the question of what MacDonald classified as a good fairy tale. Though he hesitates to describe a fairy tale at first (313), eventually, MacDonald does identify a few key characteristics. First, while a fairy tale is free to play with natural laws all it wants as long as the author remains consistent (314-15), it must remain true to moral laws (315-16). Second, while a fairy tale must convey some meaning, it will not necessarily carry the same meaning to everyone who reads it (316-19). Finally, the most important thing is that a fairy tale "wake things up that are in [the reader]; or say, to make him think things for himself" (319). The fairy tale should "rous[e] the something deeper than the understanding—the power that underlies thoughts" (320); it should "move by suggestion, to cause to imagine" (321). So, a good fairy tale must be true to moral laws, convey multiple meanings, and wake up a reader's imagination. It is clear to see why this would appeal to critics writing about MacDonald's fantasies. Indeed, his fantasies, both the full-length books and the shorter fairy tales, put these ideals into practice.

However, MacDonald wrote about more than fairy tales, and by limiting discussion to "The Fantastic Imagination," critics overlook that MacDonald held much wider views on what makes good literature. MacDonald liked fantasy, and he believed it was a powerful tool for conveying truth, but he did not believe it was the only means for conveying truth. MacDonald's other literary criticism reveals several other characteristics of what constitutes good food for the imagination. He says that it is the "highest work of the critic . . . to direct attention to the true, in whatever form it may have found utterance" ("Forms of Literature" 219), and this is what MacDonald's criticism aims to do.

First, good literature needs to look outward, with an openness to what is beyond the reach of the intellect and the senses. This is the trait MacDonald praised in Shelley's

poetry. Though MacDonald implies that Shelley may have been a little *too* interested in metaphysics (“Shelley” 272), such study does indicate an interest in things beyond what is typically recognized as reality. Furthermore, MacDonald notes that Shelley “seemed to have a peculiar attraction towards mystery, and was ready to believe in a hidden secret where no one else would have thought of one” (274). This outward-looking allowed Shelley to be “full of love to his own kind” (270), which MacDonald views as evidence of an active imagination (“The Imagination” 27). MacDonald concludes that “Shelley has written verse which will last as long as English literature lasts” (“Shelley” 281) because of his ability to look about him with “that element of wide sympathy and lofty hope for his kind” (281). Shelley’s poetry reflects an outward-looking spirit, which is the first characteristic of a healthy imagination, and consequently, of good reading material.

The second key characteristic in MacDonald’s theory is that good literature should reflect truth. This, in fact, is MacDonald’s primary criticism of Shelley: he rarely rises above the level of “fancy” (“Shelley” 279), as which MacDonald regards the literary embodiments that are “mere inventions” (“Fantastic Imagination” 314), rather than “evidences of pure imagination” (“Shelley” 279), which MacDonald considered “new embodiments of old truths” (“Fantastic Imagination” 314). Shelley’s poems are full of imagery and look outward, but they do not look in the right direction—towards eternal truths. Writing on Robert Browning’s “Christmas Eve” in 1853 (one of the earliest of the essays in *Dish of Orts*, written five years before *Phantastes*), MacDonald argues that “if a man would help his fellow-men, he can do so far more effectually by exhibiting truth than exposing error, by unveiling beauty than by a critical dissection of deformity” (“Browning” 196). For MacDonald, good literature should demonstrate the truth, in whatever it examines. Writing about Wordsworth, MacDonald notes that “nature was to him a divine teaching power,” teaching him to draw closer to God (“Wordsworth” 256). Furthermore,

MacDonald argues that “[l]oving man as Wordsworth did, he was most anxious to give him teaching” (256). MacDonald saw Wordsworth’s poetry as revealing of eternal truth. He also saw this in the works of Shakespeare. Of Shakespeare, MacDonald wrote, “Wherever the rainbow of Shakspeare's [sic] genius stands, there lies, indeed, at the foot of its glorious arch, a golden key, which will open the secret doors of truth, and admit the humble seeker into the presence of Wisdom, who, having cried in the streets in vain, sits at home and waits for him who will come to find her” (“St. George’s Day” 109). The three essays in *Orts* on Shakespeare go into great detail about the truth one can find in Shakespeare’s plays, in his characterization, plotting, and inherent message.

The third key concept is related to the others. In looking outward, and in delivering eternal truth, good literature must rise above the level of the commonplace. As discussed above, MacDonald saw immersion in the dullness and commonness of everyday life as a sure route towards self-centeredness and vice. Good literature should not focus on the mire of the everyday, but on the extraordinary. It is important to note that this does not refer exclusively to fantasy writing. While MacDonald praises Shelley’s construction of “a new universe, wherein he may rule according to his will” in *Prometheus Unbound* (“Shelley” 278), he praises Wordsworth’s excursions into nature even more highly because of their truth. Wordsworth saw beyond the ordinary in nature to the divine connection which made it extraordinary. A flower ceases to be a commonplace flower when it becomes part of the transcendent reality all around it. Furthermore, MacDonald celebrates Wordsworth’s ability to depict a “common incident” in “The Reverie of Poor Susan” in such a way “that it is not *commonplace* in the least,” because it highlights what is true and eternal in the human experience (“Wordsworth” 262). An incident does not have to be extraordinary in itself, but the artist can elevate it to that level with the telling. Similarly, MacDonald argues that “the commonplace has no place at all in the drama of Shakspeare [sic]” (“St. George’s Day”

101-02) because he “deal[s] not with unreal but with ideal persons” (101). Though MacDonald sees this take its highest form in Shakespeare’s tragedies, even the comedies present “an ideal representation of common social life” (122). The key word in this description is “ideal.” Though Shakespeare presents “ordinary nice people,” (122) he presents them in such a way that they evoke the eternal “ideal,” raising them above the commonplace, and like Wordsworth, highlighting what is true and eternal in the human experience. Indeed, MacDonald complains that the problem with too many novels is that they attempt “to interest us in worthless, commonplace people, whom, if we had our choice, we would far rather not meet at all, by surrounding them with peculiar and extraordinary circumstances” (“Wordsworth” 261). Whether through the presentation or the ideality of the situation and the people, literature that feeds the imagination should rise above the commonplace.

Finally, the best of literature should rouse the will of the reader towards righteousness and relationship with God. Ultimately, MacDonald says, “The highest in man is neither his intellect nor his imagination nor his reason; all are inferior to his will” (“Salvation from Sin 20). Knowledge and imagination are both ultimately useless if they do not rouse the individual to action. He further says that the “one true end of all speech concerning holy things is—the persuading of the individual man to cease to do evil, to set himself to do well, to look to the lord of his life to be on his side in the new struggle” (“The Remission of Sins” 42). If good literature reflects eternal truth, and eternal truths point to God, then all good literature is essential “speech concerning holy things” and should be attempting to cause a change in the life of the individual reading it. In putting together his anthology of religious verse, MacDonald refers to worship as “the highest human condition” (*England’s Antiphon* 1) and says that his goal “is to erect, as it were, in this book, a little auricle, or spot of concentrated hearing, where the hearts of my readers may

listen, and join in the song of their country's singing men and singing women" (2). He chose poems specifically fitted to his criteria of good literature, and rousing his readers to "join in the song" is one of his chief goals. For literature to succeed fully in this goal, it must grow out of a life that reflects these attributes:

The man must awake through all his soul, all his strength, all his mind, that he may worship God in unity, in the one harmonious utterance of his being: his heart must be united to fear his name To do justice, to love mercy, to walk humbly with God, is the highest life of a nation as of an individual; and when the time for speech comes, it will be such life alone that causes the speech to be strong at once and harmonious" (*England's Antiphon* 111-12).

From that "strong and harmonious" speech, then, will rise others who, hearing the words, will themselves be urged into living "the highest life." Without this rousing to action, training the imagination becomes a mere intellectual exercise that will eventually do more harm than good. Imagination and action must go together.

These elements make up the core of what MacDonald saw as essential to training the imagination, and consequently, the individual. Literature that looks outward, expresses eternal truth, and rises above the commonplace can train the imagination to flow in the right channels and rouse the will of the individual to action. Finally, MacDonald makes it clear that this training is not merely for artists and writers:

Such training is not solely fitted for the possible development of artistic faculty. Few, in this world, will ever be able to utter what they feel. Fewer still will be able to utter it in forms of their own. Nor is it necessary that there should be many such. But it is necessary that all should feel. It is necessary that all should understand and imagine the good; that all should begin, at least, to follow and find out God. ("The Imagination" 41)

Every human being has an imagination, given by God, with the purpose of drawing each person to Him, and every human being needs to know how to use that imagination to find their way. MacDonald felt that the right types of books were essential to accomplishing that purpose.

The Imagination and MacDonald's Fiction

Because he believed this, MacDonald's own works are attempts to put these ideas into action to stimulate the imaginations of his audience, to make it "eas[ier] to look upwards, and say *My God*" ("The Eloi" 115), and to urge his readers to action. Several critics have touched on this aspect of MacDonald's work. Robb suggests that "[i]t is of a piece with his whole sense of the nature of reality that he should use literature to reveal, or at least to play with, the meanings hidden in the world around us, but obscured through our ignorance and dulled awarenesses" (*God's Fiction* 56). Raeper says that MacDonald "thought that his vital spiritual vision ought to serve to transfigure the commonplace" (*George MacDonald* 311). Dearborn writes that his "goal was the expansion of the imagination, empathy with the other, and a sense of interconnection with all of life" (87). However, as is the case with most MacDonald scholarship, critics focus primarily on the application of these theories in MacDonald's fantasies. Manlove claims that MacDonald "felt the need to describe and demonstrate the presence of God and miracle in the world. It was natural therefore that [he] should write supernaturalist and Christian fiction" ("MacDonald and Kingsley" 140). Manlove specifically emphasizes the "supernaturalist" aspect of MacDonald's work, claiming that there is an "absence of a continuous creative imagination at work throughout the novels" ("Scottish Novels" 75). Prickett claims that "Imagination and fantasy forever turn about each other in the Victorian mind It is only with the works of George MacDonald, possibly the greatest fantasy-writer of that (or any other) period, that something like a fully balanced artistic theory emerges" (*Victorian*

Fantasy 11, 12). But MacDonald's ideas about the imagination are not limited to fantasy writing, whether his own or someone else's. They color and affect everything he wrote and have as much to do with his ideas about non-fantasy writing as they do with his ideas on the fantastic.

Chapter Two

Fantasy and Realism

Introduction

MacDonald's views of the imagination are integral to any discussion of his fictional work. MacDonald's beliefs, that the purpose of the imagination was to lead the individual to knowledge of and a relationship with God and that literature was a primary means of educating the imagination to do that, form the heart of his work. This is true for all of MacDonald's fiction, not just for one part. As previously discussed, MacDonald critics generally focus on his fantasies, looking to the non-fantasies primarily for religious or biographical insights or for the occasional gloss on the fantasies. To an extent, the critical preference for the fantasies does make sense. It is easy to see how his views of the imagination shaped these works. They take place in invented worlds, where MacDonald's views of the relationship between God, humanity, and the physical world take on symbolic shapes and play in an entirely imagined landscape. But it is too easy to simply dismiss the rest of MacDonald's novels as inferior, and consign them to "permanent and deserved oblivion" (Reis, *George MacDonald* 28) because they supposedly fail to conform to the modern academy's standard of novelistic art. MacDonald's non-fantasy may not conform to academic definitions of realism, but this does not justify oblivion. On the contrary, it requires taking into account the wider range of literary forms present in MacDonald's literary context, and it requires that these works be examined in light of MacDonald's unique definitions of art and his fundamental beliefs about the nature of literature. And, ultimately, it requires recognizing that to divide MacDonald's fiction along fantasy and non-fantasy lines is to overlook the remarkable unity of thought, intention, and technique his works possess.

MacDonald and Realism, According to His Critics

This is not to deny that clear differences do exist across MacDonald's oeuvre. It has been well documented by his biographers that after the unsuccessful reception of *Phantastes*,¹⁹ MacDonald was encouraged by publisher George Murray Smith to write more traditional novels (Hein, *Harmony Within* 19). MacDonald took that suggestion to heart, and clear differences do exist across his work. No one can read MacDonald's first two major works of fiction, *Phantastes* (1858) and *David Elginbrod* (1863), and fail to notice significant differences pertaining to genre. *Phantastes* is clearly a fantasy. It takes place in Fairy Land, and its hero encounters talking trees, fairies, knights, dancing statues, and giants, among other things. *David Elginbrod*, on the other hand, takes place partly in Scotland and partly in England, but entirely within the "real world." While there is supposedly a ghost in one of the locations, it eventually turns out to be a mesmerized sleepwalker. Real differences do exist.

Nonetheless, MacDonald's works need to be approached with a more flexible attitude towards genre. This is something MacDonald's critics have not done, despite the fact that they cannot even agree on how many non-fantasy works MacDonald wrote. Robert Crawford (2007) gives the number at "more than thirty" (480). Colin Manlove (1979) says there are twenty-five ("Scottish Novels" 68). Other critics give numbers in between. Yet, while even the number of non-fantasy works is questionable, most MacDonald critics persist in acting as if the designation "realism" should go unquestioned, as should the use of that designation to justify ignoring the novels.

This trend can be largely traced to MacDonald's arguably most well-known critic,

¹⁹As recounted by Rolland Hein, "*Phantastes* was, in the eyes of the critics, a colossal failure. The *Athenaeum* had run a highly deprecatory review, affirming that every author is permitted one mistake, and MacDonald had made his. 'He seems to have lost all hold of reality,' the confused critic judged, and lectured on how a successful allegorist should 'thrust the very handle of his meaning into your hand.' He could see no meaning in *Phantastes*. 'Mr. MacDonald has given us the shadow without the life which should cause it to him and account for it to us. Thus 'Phantastes' is a riddle that will not be read.' It was, he concluded, a 'confusedly furnished second-hand symbol shop.' MacDonald was crestfallen. If he were to continue to write, he must choose another genre" (*Victorian Mythmaker* 212-13).

C.S. Lewis. As discussed in the Introduction, Lewis's "Preface" has been widely quoted by MacDonald scholars in justification of praising MacDonald's fantasies and rejecting his non-fantasies. And it cannot be denied that Lewis does make a clear distinction between the two. He claims that "[w]hat [MacDonald] does best is fantasy—fantasy that hovers between the allegorical and the mythopoeic. And this, in my opinion, he does better than any man" (xxix). Of the non-fantasies, he states plainly "few of his novels are good and none is very good" (xxxiii). In making this assessment, Lewis refers to a "reasonably objective standard" (xxxiii) informing his judgment, but Lewis never actually explains what that standard is. His references to MacDonald's departures from "the canons of novel writing . . . in order to come nearer to fantasy" (xxxiii) have been interpreted as implying a more standard academic definition of realism. What subsequent critics largely ignore is that, for Lewis, his criticisms of the non-fantasies are not entirely based on the standard definition of realism; departing from the realm of realism is not a bad thing for Lewis. He claims that this is where MacDonald's non-fantasy works are at their "best" (xxxiii). Also, in looking at Lewis's actual assessment of MacDonald's literary quality, most critics ignore the fact that the statement "If we define Literature as an art whose medium is words, then certainly MacDonald has no place in its first rank—perhaps not even in its second," *includes* MacDonald's fantasies (xxviii). Lewis goes on to explain that, while he believes MacDonald excels at the art of mythopoesis, "to call it literary genius seems unsatisfactory since it can co-exist with great inferiority in the art of words—nay, since its connection with words at all turns out to be merely external and, in a sense, accidental" (xxx). This is hardly unqualified praise, even for the fantasies.

Catherine Durie (1990) has suggested that Lewis was speaking as a fan, rather than a literary critic when he wrote this and that his conclusions need, therefore, to be reconsidered (164), particularly his assessment of MacDonald's non-fantasies. Nonetheless, critics

continue to treat Lewis's assessment of MacDonald's works as if it is infallible, simply because it comes from Lewis. As mentioned earlier, Durie herself suggests that the only reason to read MacDonald's non-fantasies is because of the relationship to Lewis (163). Whatever limited approbation he may have offered for MacDonald's non-fantasies, Lewis's negative assessment of MacDonald as writer of realism has taken a strong hold on MacDonald scholarship.

This general assessment became even more deeply rooted with Richard Reis's *George MacDonald* (1972). Where Lewis suggests that the leanings towards fantasy are the saving grace of some of MacDonald's novels, Reis is not so forgiving. In writing the first major monograph on MacDonald to focus on the literary aspects of his works,²⁰ Reis establishes many of the standard tropes of subsequent MacDonald criticism, and he is very clear about the standards he uses to judge MacDonald's non-fantasy works: "By 'realism' I mean not the creation of a completely credible world like the one in which we live, work, and suffer, but an attempt in that direction" (27). He further claims that "it is equally clear that MacDonald's conventional novels are, or attempt to be, in the realistic tradition" (112). Consequently, having concluded that, because MacDonald's non-fantasies are supposedly set in this world (or something like it), Reis proceeds to judge MacDonald according to the standards of so-called realism. The results are hardly flattering. He describes:

[M]any of the general characteristics of MacDonald's 'realistic' fiction: it is conventional, proper, optimistic, didactic, sentimental, verbose [the novels] are very much alike, surprisingly so for a body of work so large and written over a period of thirty-four years, from 1863-1897 The plots are based on a few formulas; the characters are usually stereotypes; the thematic issues are derivative; and the mechanisms of suspense and motivation are

²⁰ Robert Lee Wolff's *The Golden Key* (1961) is considered the first major monograph on MacDonald, but Wolff's focus is more on psychoanalyzing MacDonald himself through the books, than on actually analyzing the books.

sensational and artificial. (52-53)

Basically, Reis declares MacDonald an abject failure as a writer of realism, fully deserving of the oblivion Reis predicts (28).

However, Reis's analysis is troubling for many reasons. Some of his judgments are simply unfair. First, many of Reis's accusations against MacDonald's style are based on characteristics that are generally associated with the Victorian period as a whole. Reis acknowledges that many of the supposedly negative characteristics of MacDonald's writings can be traced to Victorian tastes and styles (52), yet he uses these characteristics to justify his rejection of MacDonald's non-fantasy. For example, Reis criticizes MacDonald's frequent use of the happy ending, but happy endings, where good is rewarded and evil is punished, were a standard characteristic of Victorian novels (Flint 25), and such endings are not generally viewed as a reason for disregarding the works of other eminent Victorians, even when they are clearly manufactured by the novelist. Charles Dickens rewrote the ending to *Great Expectations* (1860-61) on the advice of Edward Bulwer-Lytton to give Pip and Estella the possibility of a happy ending (Mitchell 508), yet *Great Expectations* is still considered one of the canon works of the Victorian period. In *Barchester Towers* (1857), Anthony Trollope actually interrupts the narrative when the heroine's happy ending seems in jeopardy, assuring his readers that his heroine will, in fact, *not* marry either of the odious men currently pursuing her (126-28). Her happy ending is never in any real danger. By criticizing MacDonald for doing the very things that are accepted in his contemporaries, Reis holds MacDonald to an anachronistic standard. MacDonald would not have been writing novels with a late-twentieth century academic definition of what constituted a good novel; he would have been writing with a nineteenth-century definition which, to Reis, seems reason enough to justify declaring him a failure.

Likewise, Reis claims that MacDonald's novels are repetitive and can be reduced to

a “hypothetical ‘typical’ MacDonald novel” because they repeat plot elements and character types (57). He claims that they adhere “to a few plot-formulas: boy-meets-and-marries-girl, young-man-grows-up-and-finds-God, or poor-boy-lives-nobly-and-inherits-title” (57). For Reis, they have no individual value. Reis is correct in his assertion that some things do appear multiple times. Nonetheless, this does not justify reducing all of MacDonald’s novels to a type and discarding them as individuals. Yuko Ashitagawa (2007) has demonstrated the things that critics miss when lumping together two of MacDonald’s short fairy tales, noting that “potentially contradictory ideas can be read in the two texts and that the generic classification of the texts as fairy tales does not say much about some important characteristics of the texts” (45). She further argues that, while “[g]enre classifications rely on the recognition of certain common features among texts, . . . this tends to predetermine and restrict the points of analysis” (58). If such classification ignores unique differences in two short fairy tales, it ignores much, much more in two dozen long novels. After all, most authors, especially if they are prolific, have signature characteristics that can be traced through their oeuvres. The works of Jane Austen, though significantly fewer in number, nonetheless feature similar plots and characterizations. Likewise, the works of Charles Dickens are known by specifically Dickensian characteristics. MacDonald is no different. This does not mean that his non-fantasy novels are interchangeable or that they should be discarded. They contain much more variety than Reis admits.²¹

Besides these unfair criticisms, Reis overlooks the complexity of the Victorian literary picture. He assumes without question that MacDonald’s intention is to produce realist fiction, but this is not so easily proved. Reis insists that MacDonald “knew that conditions of the ‘marketplace’ demanded realism of a sort, and he attempted to provide it” (42). The “conditions of the ‘marketplace’” demanded no such thing. While “domestic

²¹ This variety will be more fully explored in subsequent chapters.

realism” may have “ruled the form for most of the period” (David 1), there was no shortage of non-realistic options, as evidenced by the wide assortment of sensationalism, Gothic novels, and romances produced during the period (Pykett 191). As shall be discussed below, debates about the nature and future of the novel were very common during the Victorian period. Realism was only one side of the discussion, and for Reis to automatically conclude that MacDonald was writing realism when he was not writing fantasy is based on an incomplete picture. Then, having jumped to his conclusion, Reis ignores anything MacDonald himself said that would challenge it. For example, he notes that “MacDonald recognized that his stories were not ‘lifelike’ . . . but he defended them by disparaging the idea that life is either dull or unjust. Even so, it is obvious that he cared more for ‘spiritual truth’ as he conceived it than for strict credibility” (42). MacDonald admits that his stories may not mesh with standard expectations of lifelikeness, that he was attempting to do something different, but Reis persists in assuming that MacDonald was trying to be a realist. Reis refuses to recognize that MacDonald may not have been attempting to provide realism; he persists in claiming that he just wrote bad realism. Likewise, Reis notes that “Coincidence, that feeblest crutch of the plot-maker, is prominent in MacDonald’s stories; but he again defends himself, on the ground that the supposedly improbable is less so than we think, . . . that experience *is* full of coincidences, a ‘realistic’ criterion based simply upon observation of real life” (48). Reis completely disregards MacDonald’s stated views because they do not conform to his own views of realism. Again, Reis measures MacDonald against an arbitrary standard MacDonald had no intention of meeting.

Reis’s biggest mistake, however, is in assuming that fantasy and realism are entirely separate and exclusive. He stresses this division, saying, “But the crucial distinction between realistic and fantastic fiction must at least be strongly emphasized. These two

kinds of storytelling require entirely different talents—even different prose styles. They likewise appeal to different tastes, so that the distinction between them is important for what it may show about the course of literary history” (27). According to Reis, fantasy and realism have virtually nothing in common, and consequently, one person can not be expected to be good at both of them. Applying this to MacDonald, he asserts that “Everything about George MacDonald’s character, life, philosophy, and cast of mind seems, in the glare of hindsight, to have fitted him for the writing of symbolic fantasy and to have predestined him to mediocrity as a realistic novelist” (106). Nor is Reis alone in this assessment. Other critics, contemporary with Reis, make similar claims. Muriel Hutton (1975) suggests that “MacDonald’s medium is fiction, which he must make the reader accept, at least temporarily, as credible; he cannot rely at all for any purposes on other forms of writing” (43). Colin Manlove (1979) writes that “[t]here is as much of a division between the novels and the fantasies, as indeed between the literary principles in both” (“Scottish Novels” 85). According to these critics, fantasy and realism were entirely separate and exclusive.

However, the forms are not as different as Reis claims. More recent criticism has challenged the notion that fantasy and realism are entirely exclusive. They are not. Much of the problem springs from a “tendency to treat realism as though it were *given* as a philosophical rather than a literary problem, to emphasize theory and intention rather than actual practice” (Jenkins 2). In practice, realism does not present reality. Jenkins (1978) explains:

Suppose I enter a train at Victoria Station and open a novel in which a man enters a train at Victoria Station. I shall not be surprised if the writer gets him ‘realistically’ to Brighton or Belgrade before I myself get to East Croydon. I know that this realist novelist is not offering me ‘reality’—how

many hundreds of pages of description would be required to render the complex reality of Victoria station?—but that he is selecting, concentrating, and re-ordering in relation to a game of make-believe conducted through the signs on these processed sheets of vegetable matter. (5)

At its highest point, true realism is impossible. The writer picks and chooses and hopes that by “skilfully design[ing] and carefully structur[ing], [the text] can provide a paradigm of the conditions and circumstances, laws and relationships which are deemed to prevail in the ‘real’ world” (Williams 257-58). In turn, this raises questions about how and why individual authors make the choices they make about what they include and exclude. Who is to say one author’s perception of reality is any more or less valid than another writer’s? Reality is, in many ways, subjective, and a great deal depends on an individual author’s perspective. Stephen Prickett’s *Victorian Fantasy* (2005) notes that many modern ideas of realism come from George Eliot, and that “it is a measure of George Eliot’s greatness . . . that it often escapes our notice how reductionist this convention is—and how circumscribed the ‘reality’ it portrays” (1). He further notes that “realism and fantasy are two sides of the same coin: that realism is as much an arbitrary and literary convention as fantasy, and that fantasy is as dependent on mundane experience as realism” (191). One could argue, however, that it is not so much a question of the opposite sides of a coin as of a sliding scale from one to the other. Fiction is fiction, whether it be fantasy, realism, or anything in between. All fiction, even so-called realism, takes place in a world constructed and controlled by the author, and the history of literature is full of works which frequently mix elements of fantasy with elements of realism. MacDonald’s works are further evidence that the two forms are not so mutually exclusive. From Reis’s perspective, his final verdict makes sense. However, because it was achieved by imposing his own literary ideas on MacDonald’s works, rather than by looking at what those works actually do, those views

need to be re-evaluated.

Consequently, perhaps the most troubling fact of Reis's analysis is the way in which his conclusions have been accepted, almost without question, by later scholars. Reis's analysis is the product of his literary climate, so it is understandable that he reached the conclusions he did. But theories of genre have evolved since he drew his conclusions. Unfortunately, MacDonald scholarship has not evolved with them. In the nearly forty years since Reis's book appeared, no-one has fully challenged either his methods or his conclusions. David Robb has come the closest. Among MacDonald's critics, Robb has been the staunchest defender of the non-fantasies. He has written extensively about MacDonald's Scottish novels, and he argues that "[t]hey are what they are, not (I believe) because of incompetence or because MacDonald did not really want to write them. Instead, they are to be seen as MacDonald's most ambitious, if flawed, attempts to articulate his vision in all its full meaning" (*God's Fiction* 25). Unlike Reis, Robb does not see MacDonald as inherently incapable of writing good non-fantasy. Nor does Robb ignore MacDonald's stated intentions. Instead, he looks at MacDonald's larger purpose, which Robb calls MacDonald's "perennial desire to create a romanticised vision of things," and suggests that "In his novels, more clearly and directly than in any other literary medium, MacDonald was able to try to achieve this Romantic transformation, and he used a variety of means to make our commonplace world seem strange and attractive, while familiar" (*God's Fiction* 30). This is probably the most favorable review MacDonald's non-fantasy has received by a modern critic. Robb does not dismiss MacDonald's views in favor of his own views; he recognizes the non-fantasies as an embodiment of MacDonald's philosophy.

Robb neither ignores MacDonald's stated views of his primary intentions, nor automatically assumes that strict realism was a secondary consideration. While he claims that "to write novels involves a commitment to portraying the mundane reality of everyday

life” (*God’s Fiction* 29), he still acknowledges the Victorian debates on genre, and notes that MacDonald would have been aware of his options when it came to his non-fantasies (*God’s Fiction* 28-29). He recognizes that MacDonald knew what he was doing when he decided how to shape his non-fantasies:

MacDonald consciously eschews the received wisdom of the art of the novel—a wisdom which . . . elevates mimetic illusion, and the minimalising of anything which works against that illusion, as its ultimate goal and inevitable method. His claim of another and better concept of art, as not so much an end in itself as a means to divine ends . . . apparently involves—in his hands at least—the flouting of many accepted, seemingly inevitable canons of form, taste, and judgment in fiction. (“Realism and Fantasy” 278)

Reading between the lines, however, it is clear that while Robb acknowledges a degree of intentionality on MacDonald’s part, he equally acknowledges the “received wisdom” and the claims of the “accepted” and “inevitable canons of form, taste, and judgment” that MacDonald “flouts.” If one flouts such universally agreed-upon things, the result will not be what it should. And despite his praise, Robb still concludes that “these long novels seem examples of the worst kind of shapeless, self-indulgent Victorian fictional excess. No brief discussion here can finally dispel that impression; only a sympathetic reading can do that” (*God’s Fiction* 42). Nonetheless, Robb at least tries to defend MacDonald against the criticisms leveled by Reis, on the grounds that maybe he was not actually trying to do what Reis assumes he was trying to do, that maybe he had a larger purpose in mind that influenced his literary choices.

Most other MacDonald critics do not even try. On the contrary, Reis’s conclusions are treated as practically gospel. Rolland Hein (1982) writes that “Others – notably Lewis and Reis – have evaluated MacDonald’s literary qualities, and there is little point in my

repeating their opinions” (*Harmony Within* xvi). Ann Boaden (1981) acknowledges that “[i]t is through his novels that MacDonald’s vision and intensity are most fully communicated” (9). But, she echoes Reis’s ideas and techniques when she says MacDonald’s “novels deal in a different sphere of reality than daily experience provides” (9) and that his “chosen genre, realistic social fiction” creates expectations that MacDonald “does not always satisfy” (10). It is taken for granted that, despite MacDonald’s assertions of a unique vision of reality, he is trying to write conventional realism and just doing it badly. Too many critics simply accept this interpretation without question.

Reis’s observations, together with those of Lewis, have created a critical climate in which scholars, even when they do not address Reis directly, seem to feel uncomfortable praising MacDonald’s works. William Raeper (1987) provides a clear example of this type of critical confusion. Raeper acknowledges that MacDonald’s non-fantasies “have a distinctiveness that is hard to classify, unless it be that of theological romance” (*George MacDonald* 184). He notes the various influences on MacDonald, and he describes MacDonald’s awareness of the complexities of the literary marketplace (196-201). He suggests that “some readers have found in MacDonald’s work a richness that they find in no other writer” (202). He even briefly explores the idea that the standard criticisms of MacDonald’s non-fantasy can be explained away if his non-fantasies are treated as having more in common with fairy tales than with other novels (208-09). But, like Robb, he cannot allow the praise to stand. He says MacDonald’s “prose is like syrup, affected and Latinate, full of pulpit oratory. Many of the novels were written as though delivered straight from the pulpit” (195). Of MacDonald plots, Raeper writes that the “plots (when there is a plot) echo his sentences” (195). His characters are “mere pegs to hang sermons on and this results in an indifference to the plots of the novels which can be both bewildering and irritating” (196). And he concludes that MacDonald “deserves some merit as a passable mid-Victorian

Scottish novelist or as a theological storyteller” (213). In other words, MacDonald’s works are innovative, complex, and rich, but they are still bad.

Other critics seem to feel the need to explain their choice to write on these less-acceptable works. Just as Boaden and Reaper conceded MacDonald’s supposed inferiority as a realist, other critics do similar things. Adrian Gunther (1996) justifies his choice to write on MacDonald’s *Castle Warlock* (1882) by claiming that “With several other critics I find in his novels the same patterns of symbol and imagery and the same central themes as in his fantasy works. Anyone interested in his fairy tales and fantasy works would do well to dip into the novels for detailed elucidation of their central preoccupation” (“Fantasy Elements” 6). In other words, the novels are useful primarily for what they add to our understanding of the fantasies, rather than for any inherent merit in themselves. Similarly, Bonnie Gaarden (2006) writes:

While it is not my purpose to generalize about the richness of the lode from which it comes, I do want to argue that *Heather and Snow* is a gem, albeit one hard to classify MacDonald’s novels are often faulted for loose and ill-connected plots constantly interrupted by his preaching, yet *Heather and Snow* is written with the economy and simplicity of the fairy tale and the parable. (59)

Gaarden cannot simply write about *Heather and Snow* (1893) because she finds it interesting. She has to acknowledge the general criticism of MacDonald’s non-fantasies and justify her decision to write about one of these books. Passages like this can be found in many of the relative few essays written about MacDonald’s non-fantasies. Though neither Gaarden nor Gunther makes reference to Reis, his dismissal of the novels has so permeated MacDonald scholarship that scholars feel they must explain, justify, and sometimes, even apologize for their work.

It should not be this way. While there are undeniable differences between the fantasies and the non-fantasies, MacDonald's oeuvre should not be divided with one part hailed as visionary and the other as virtually worthless. The differences are not so extreme. On the contrary, the two parts of MacDonald's fiction have much more in common than is generally recognized, and to divide it along genre lines is to miss those commonalities. MacDonald intended his fiction to educate the imaginations of his audience. In both his fantasies and non-fantasies, MacDonald used whatever elements he needed to achieve this education.

Generic Influences on MacDonald

Just as MacDonald's views of the imagination were shaped and influenced by numerous traditions, MacDonald's views on genre were likely shaped by a variety of influences. Kirstin Jeffrey Johnson (2005) has argued that MacDonald "grew up in a culture that placed great value upon story" (36) and that one of MacDonald's first models is the Bible itself, in which "there is more story . . . than any other genre" (35). MacDonald was deeply familiar with what Johnson calls "Sacred Story," stories through which "readers could come to a better understanding of God" (35). She further notes that MacDonald:

was also gifted with an education that introduced him to a wealth of storied literature, not only the stories of ancient Scotland but those of ancient Greece, the Norse myths, the French ballads, and the German *Märchen* (fairy tales). In Mallory, Dante, Chaucer, Milton, Spenser, Goethe, Shakespeare, and Bunyan, he discovered profound stories that were shaped by and responded to Scripture. He found the same in such poets as Herbert, Crashaw, and Sidney, and in contemporaries such as Coleridge, Zola, and Tolstoy. (36)

MacDonald's son, Ronald, notes that his father's "knowledge of English poetry from

Chaucer to Browning surpassed that of any other man whose knowledge I have known”

(54). MacDonald believed in the power of story, and he had a deep well of knowledge on which to draw. When the time came to write his own stories, he had many options to choose from.

As briefly discussed above, much of the criticism arguing that MacDonald’s non-fantasy novels should be dismissed is rooted in the critical assumption that, if he was not actively pursuing fantasy, he must have been writing realism, as that was the other option in the Victorian marketplace. As Lyn Pykett (2001) argues:

By the late 1970s it seemed to have become a universally acknowledged truth that the typical form of the nineteenth-century English novel was the ‘classic realist text,’ a conservative literary form concerned to reinscribe a commonsense view of things as they are, whose formal and ideological characteristics were adumbrated (and frequently castigated) by a host of critics bent on a radical critique of literature and its institutions. (192)

However, more recent critics have taken issue with this presumption “of the hegemony of realism in the Victorian novel” and

have explored the non-realist or anti-realist aspects of canonical Victorian novels, or redirected literary historical attention to the cultural significance of a range of bestselling and sometimes controversial nineteenth-century fiction texts such as the sensation novel of the 1860s and a number of fantastic narratives from the *fin-de-siècle* which do not conform to the tenets of ‘classic’ ‘bourgeois’ realism, and which have tended, hitherto, to be pushed to the margins of literary critical attention, or treated as aberrant. (Pykett 192)

The Victorian market that MacDonald joined was a complex and varied one, which offered

a vast array of choices for the ever-growing base of novel-readers in the century.

It cannot be denied that realism was one of the dominant modes of the era. Fiction was viewed with suspicion by many people because of its potential to influence people's behavior (Flint 17-18). In the eighteenth century, as the novel was rising to prominence, it was felt by some that stories based in reality were preferable, believing that "[w]orks of fiction were subjected to general condemnation as wildly fanciful pieces of folly that served no useful or moral purpose" (Botting 25). It was felt that fiction was potentially dangerous, that "in the maintenance of morality, propriety and virtue, truth, reason, knowledge and taste should always be elevated above fiction, passion, ignorance and depravity" (Botting 27). When faced with the choice between realist fiction and Gothic romance, realism was preferable because it could offer "instructive observations on the living world" (Botting 27). As the eighteenth century gave way to the nineteenth, this attitude persisted. Linda Shires (2001) speculates that most early Victorians would have expected a certain degree of realism in their novels, the presentation of a familiar world with familiar attributes. She describes:

Through the presentation of an intelligible history, classic realism calls forth certain conventional reading practices, precisely because of the text's aesthetic This form not only places the reader in a position of privileged knowing and moral judgment, thus shaping his/her subjectivity into middle-class Victorian norms, but often does so with the aim of creating conformity. The realist novel largely accepts middle-class ethics and mores. The emotionally complex hero or heroine is molded to the bourgeois ideal of the rational man or woman of virtue. Relying on a structure of psychological development, the classic realist novel allows lapses from a bourgeois code, but treats them as errors of judgment owing to immaturity. (65)

Realist novels presented a world that reflected something recognizable to the experiences of the readers. And, certainly, this realist aesthetic can be traced through many of the major novels of the Victorian period.

Alongside it, however, was an alternative. As early as the mid-eighteenth century, many authors were turning their works in non-realist directions. Some feared that by “encouraging readers’ credulity and imagination, and in blurring the boundaries between supernatural and illusory dimensions and natural and real worlds, romances loosened the moral and rational structures that ordered everyday life. By displaying monsters in too attractive a light, vice rather than virtue might be promoted” (Botting 27-28). Nonetheless, the extreme popularity of these works indicates that these fears were not shared by everyone. The Gothic romance offered readers something completely different from their daily lives:

Through its presentations of supernatural, sensational and terrifying incidents, imagined or not, Gothic produced emotional effects on its readers rather than developing a rational or properly cultivated response. Exciting rather than informing, it chilled their blood, delighted their superstitious fancies and fed uncultivated appetites for marvellous and strange events, instead of instructing readers with moral lessons that inculcated decent and tasteful attitudes to literature and life. (Botting 4)

Gothic set itself up in direct opposition to the realist school of fiction, sometimes directly challenging the assumptions about what actually constitutes “reality” and suggesting that reality is not as limited as the realist novelists suggest (Punter, *Literature of Terror Vol. 2*, 185-86) and always providing an alternative to that reality.

In the early nineteenth century, Gothic’s popularity faded somewhat, but it did not disappear. Arguably, the Victorian genre closest to Gothic fiction was the sensation novel,

which was marked by “elaborately complex plots” full of “murder, sexual betrayal, and double identity” (Thomas 179). Pykett quotes Thomas Hardy’s own description of his novel *Desperate Remedies* as a “template for the mid-Victorian sensation novel” (193). Hardy wrote that it contained “a long and intricately inwrought chain of circumstance [of] murder, blackmail, illegitimacy, impersonation, eavesdropping, multiple secrets, a suggestion of bigamy, amateur and professional detectives” (Qtd. in Pykett 193).

Furthermore, Gothic and sensational elements found their way into nearly everything.

Pykett suggests:

gothic (broadly defined) might almost be described as the paradigmatic form of the fantastic in Victorian fiction ‘Gothic traces’ were embedded in a range of popular fictional genres: in crime novels in the 1830s and 1840s; in the ghost story from the 1840s to the end of the period, in the sensation novel which dominated the bestseller lists and critical columns in the early 1860s; in the rise of the modern detective story, such as Charles Dickens’s *Bleak House* (1853), Wilkie Collins’s *The Moonstone* (1868), and Sir Arthur Conan Doyle’s Sherlock Holmes stories, beginning with *A Study in Scarlet* in 1887; in a range of *fin-de-siècle* degenerationist fantasies and imperial romances, and in what H.G. Wells called the scientific romance. (192-93)

The question of genre during the Victorian period was complex. Numerous new genres arose during the Victorian period, and what stands out is how loosely defined they were and how much crossing over took place. There were few hard-and-fast walls between them, and elements of Gothic and sensationalism found their way into the works of even the most widely recognized realists of the period (Pykett 193). As an active member of the Victorian literary world, MacDonald would have been aware of these movements. He read avidly. He admired Eliot’s realism (Hein, *Victorian Mythmaker* 230-31), and he was well versed in

sensationalism and the Gothic (Raeper, *George MacDonald* 196-200). As he wrote his own fiction, all of these possibilities were available to him.

At the same time, the first stirrings of what would later become fantasy were taking place. Colin Manlove (1994) suggests that “Fantasy as a self-aware genre did not really come into being until after 1965 and the ‘discovery’ of Tolkien by the United States” (*Scottish Fantasy* 1). He may be correct in this assertion that fantasy as a recognized genre is relatively new, but writings that feature elements of fantasy date back millennia, and during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century authors were beginning to draw consciously on these elements in the construction of their works. This movement was related to the romance, which was so popular among the Gothic writers and which drew upon the “myths, legends and folklore of medieval romances [and] conjured up magical worlds and tales of knights, monsters, ghosts and extravagant adventures and terrors” (Botting 3) and added additional complexity to the Victorian literary picture. Stephen Prickett argues that between 1775 and 1825 the word *fantasy* underwent a cultural transformation. In 1775, it would have “signified a kind of imagination one might expect to find in madmen—or in children” (*Victorian Fantasy* 6). It was frequently used in a “semi-contemptuous [way], implying delusion, hallucination, or simply wishful thinking. Fantasy might be horrible, it might be delightful, but it was definitely unreal, and therefore of little more than clinical interest to sane and practical citizens” (Prickett 5). Within fifty years, however:

something very extraordinary had happened. From being terms of derision, or descriptions of daydreaming, words like *fantasy* and *imagination* suddenly began to take on new status as hurrah words. People began to feel that the very unreality of fantasy gave its creations a kind of separate existence, an autonomy, even a ‘real life’ of their own. They even began to feel

differently about madmen and children, who now became objects of interest.

(6)

The reasons for this transformation are varied and complex. Prickett points to a three-fold convergence of conditions: “the idea of the *Gothick*; another is a revival of religious mysticism and a renewed feeling for the numinous . . . ; a third is the purely human revulsion against the squalid and degrading conditions of the early industrial revolution” (12-13). These three factors, combined with Romanticism’s elevation of imagination, set the stage for a more open attitude towards fantasy.²²

In many ways, it was still largely considered a children’s genre, most properly manifested in the fairy tale. By the time MacDonald started writing, the fairy tale for children was an established genre. As discussed in chapter one, their acceptance was not universal, and many people still viewed the imagination as suspect, but the tales of Charles Perrault, which were originally translated into English a century earlier, continued to be widely read (Zipes 106). Benjamin Tabart’s *Popular Fairy Tales* was published in 1818 (Raeper, *George MacDonald* 307), and when the tales of the Brothers Grimm (1823) and Hans Christian Anderson (1846) were first published in England, they met an enthusiastic audience (Prickett, *Victorian Fantasy* 8). MacDonald was likely familiar with all of these texts, as well as those written by his own contemporaries, such as his friend John Ruskin’s *King of the Golden River* (1851) and William Thackeray’s *The Rose and the Ring* (1854). Colin Manlove (1999) has singled out Francis Paget’s *The Hope of the Katzekopfs* (1844) and Frances Browne’s *Granny’s Wonderful Chair* (1856) as among the most influential of original English fairy tales on MacDonald’s fiction (“MacDonald and the Fairy Tales” 17). Browne’s, in particular, as the “first truly Christian Victorian fantasy, being both mystical and moral, and shadowing divine reality through folk- and fairy-tale symbolism” (Manlove

²² For a more complete explanation of this transition, see Stephen Prickett’s *Victorian Fantasy* (2002), chapter 1 “Evolution of a Word.”

20), provided MacDonald an example of how fantasy could be used to convey Christian ideals. MacDonald clearly read widely in the genre and was aware of the various possibilities it offered.

MacDonald also read widely in the literature coming out of Germany. He read and admired the Grimms, but he did not stop there. As discussed in the previous chapter, the German Romantics had a profound influence on MacDonald's ideas about the imagination. They also provided additional depth and complexity to the field of genres available to him. For one thing, German writers saw a broader application for fairy tales and fantasy:

If fairies were relegated to the nursery in Britain, this was not at all true in Germany where Hoffmann, Novalis, Tieck and De la Motte Fouqué turned out fantasies for adults. Theirs was a writing which concentrated on spiritual values and differing states of consciousness – in Hoffmann's case bringing the reader to the very edge of madness itself. These writers acknowledged the powerful inner world and the importance of the human spirit There was simply no place for such writing within the context of the domestic Victorian novel. (Raeper, *George MacDonald* 311)

In particular, the German authors' use of the fairy story for dealing with spiritual issues would have appealed to MacDonald as a writer.

In addition, the German novel was in many ways quite different from the English novel. It lacked "the kind of closely plotted, realistic structures pioneered by Jane Austen in English and which had rapidly become the norm of the nineteenth-century novel" (Prickett *Victorian Fantasy* 175) and featured more of the "loose episodic structure and fantastic events more commonly associated with fairy stories" (Prickett 175). Works such as Goethe's *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre* (1796) and *Wilhelm Meisters Wanderjahre* (1821) introduced MacDonald to the *Bildungsroman* form. They also provided a model, "a whole

way of structuring experience, part-fantasy, part-realism” (Prickett 185). Much has been made of the relationship between Goethe’s works and MacDonald’s *Phantastes* (1858).²³ However, it should be noted that Goethe’s works were largely intended as realism:

Goethe’s literary references had the effect of placing his novel in relation to what he saw as the mainstream development of prose realism; MacDonald contrives to suggest that behind the veil of normality in that tradition was something marvelous and magical that could not be wholly eradicated from everyday life. In the very literature where Goethe had assiduously sought bourgeois reality, MacDonald discovers romance—awaiting only the mysticism of Novalis and his fellow Germans to be awakened into new life. (Prickett 191)

Phantastes was unquestionably influenced by Goethe’s works, but MacDonald found this “romance” in a realist work. The mixing of the two, the infusion of romance into an otherwise realist work provides a model for more than pure fantasy or pure realism. It melds the two, and attempts at similar melding appear throughout MacDonald’s oeuvre.

The melding of realism and the fantastic is a key element in Scottish literature as well. The importance of MacDonald’s Scottish heritage should not be underestimated, yet while critics have examined his indebtedness to German traditions and early English fantasy writing, his relationship to Scottish writing has received relatively little attention.²⁴ When looking at the range of engagement with the marvelous that appears throughout MacDonald’s oeuvre, however, his Scottish predecessors are of immense importance. The tension between realism and fantasy has been a feature of Scottish literature since its beginnings. The *Vita Columbae* features a battle between Columba and some “Pictish

²³ See Prickett, *Victorian Fantasy*, chapter 6 “From Bildungsroman to Death-Romance.”

²⁴ David Robb has done the most work on this subject. See “Extract from a Lecture Given By Dr. David Robb at Huntly on Wednesday 26th September 1990” (1990): 5-13; and “‘Perhaps He Will Need to Love Scotland Too’: The Importance of MacDonald’s Scottish Sources” (2008).

magicians” and it features “the first written account of the Loch Ness Monster” (Crawford, *History* 29). While mixing accounts of supernatural, frequently miraculous, events alongside more verifiably factual events is a common feature of hagiography in general, it is significant that this appears so prominently so early. Nor is *Vita Columbae* the only early Scottish work to show a fascination with the supernatural. The works of Michael Scot (c. 1200) earned him a posthumous reputation as a wizard and a place in Dante’s hell (Crawford, *History* 46), and the works of Thomas the Rhymer (13th cent.) detail a mysterious journey and a prophetic vision (Crawford, *History* 46). Colin Manlove’s *Scottish Fantasy Literature* (1999) traces the origins of fantasy literature in Scotland to the oral tradition of tales and songs (20-24). MacDonald knew and cherished these “fairytales and myths from the rich Celtic and Gaelic heritage of Scotland” which were told him by his father (Fink and Hein 15).

In the decades leading up to his own literary career, MacDonald would have found much to draw on in the works of Robert Burns, Ossian, Walter Scott, and James Hogg. David Robb suggests that while Burns did not have much direct influence on MacDonald’s works, “MacDonald was conscious of, and proud of, a kinship of outlook with Burns” (“Lecture” 8). Robb also suggests that MacDonald drew inspiration from “the outspoken ferocity of Burns’s attacks on ecclesiastical opponents” and Burns’s idealized portraits of sexual love (“Lecture” 8). In the poems James MacPherson claimed were by “Ossian,”²⁵ MacDonald

found a heroic world, in which the deeds and attitudes of men and women take on a vast, epic significance. He found a poetic narrative which locates individuals, time and time again, in a wide landscape – a relationship to which his own fiction often tends. He found (and he was certainly not alone

²⁵ MacDonald apparently accepted MacPherson’s claims of the poems’ authenticity (Robb, “Lecture” 9).

in this) an image of natural man – an image which portrays man as heroic, valiant, chivalrous, loving and emotional. More specifically, he found Ossian himself (who appears as a character in his own poems, as it were) a figure who is both warrior and bard – not a bad embodiment of MacDonald's own sense of himself. (Robb, "Lecture" 9)

Both of these poets contributed to MacDonald's understanding of the nature of the world around him. They added to its mystery and expansiveness, and they conveyed that image through their works.

In terms of the novel and genre, Scott and Hogg are key figures for MacDonald. Robb suggests that "MacDonald was undoubtedly influenced by that crucial effect that Scott had on the novel as a literary form: he had given it a new status – a respectability which was partly a matter of demonstrating how it could handle great – indeed, epic – themes and partly a matter of draining any hint of the licentious from hugely successful works of fiction" ("Lecture" 6). More than that, though, as Punter points out:

There is, in fact, a curious paradox in Scott's relation to historical fiction: on the one hand, his industry and zeal, his sheer bulk of knowledge, his portrayal of whole panoramas of the past rather than merely of the aristocracy gave the historical novel a basis in the real which it had never before had, while on the other an intense and continuing interest in legendry and the supernatural provides a constant accompaniment to his version of the past. The two things are far from mutually exclusive: the point is that instead of mythologizing *about* the past Scott tries to endow with new vitality the actual myths *of* the past, the beliefs by which our ancestors lived. (*Literature of Terror Vol. 1*, 141).

This paradox, this mixing of the real with myth and the suitability of the form to address

“great themes” would have appealed to MacDonald. Similarly, Hogg’s work “combined elements of Scottish folk tales and myths” (Raeper, *George MacDonald* 209), yet maintains “the ideology of a world more concrete than that of pure romance” (Crawford, “James Hogg” 90). Robb speculates that “what MacDonald responded to in Hogg’s writing was its tendency to move away from, or beyond, the world of the everyday” (“Lecture” 11) and his “regular juxtaposition of the commonplace and the other worldly, whether in the form of ghosts, or the peasant belief in fairies and omens, or in striking natural events which are viewed as the intervention of Providence” (“Lecture” 12).²⁶ From his Scottish predecessors, MacDonald received a sense of the fluidity of reality and the tension between fantasy and reality.

It has been said of Hogg that “he was an inveterate, almost a compulsive mixer of genres—‘pastoral-comical, historical-pastoral, tragical-comical-historical-pastoral’” (Crawford, “James Hogg” 93). The same can be said of MacDonald. Ultimately, it is impossible to trace any one or two specific generic influences on MacDonald. What emerges from a survey of the situation when MacDonald started writing is a chaotic and ultimately indefinable set of intermixing and crisscrossing genres running the gamut from pure fantasy to pure realism and including everything in between. As he wrote, MacDonald drew on the full range.

MacDonald’s View of Genre

MacDonald himself actually writes very little on the subject of genre. While his literary criticism gives a strong impression of what he considers “good art,”²⁷ he says very little about genre in that writing, and with the exception of fairy tales in “The Fantastic Imagination,” he never actually straightforwardly addresses fiction in any of his essays. For a writer whose work has come to be so defined by genre, this absence seems significant.

²⁶ For more about MacDonald and Hogg, see William Raeper (1992), “Diamond and Kilmeny: MacDonald, Hogg, and the Scottish Folk Tradition.”

²⁷ See Chapter One for a thorough discussion of this.

However, he does talk about the relationship between form and content. Though mostly given in passing references throughout his criticism and sermons, MacDonald's ideas about literary form are significant to any study of his own fiction. These passing references, though relatively rare, reveal what is probably the single most important element of MacDonald's attitude towards the forms of literature.

Much of what MacDonald said about form in his literary criticism comes from *England's Antiphon*, his anthology of English religious verse. As an editor and anthologizer, MacDonald's reasons for choosing the works he chooses and his comments about them reveal his attitudes towards various aspects of literary form. In justifying his privileging of lyric poetry over epic and dramatic poetry, he claims that "I wish to make my book valuable in its parts as in itself. The value of a thing depends in large measure upon its unity, its wholeness However valuable an extract may be . . . an entire lyric . . . if worthy of a place at all, is of greater value, especially if regarded in relation to the form of setting with which I hope to surround it" (3). MacDonald gave a great deal of thought to the structure of his anthology, to what would and would not be included. His choice to include mostly complete poems shows that he respects the organic unity of a piece of literature, the way each element works together to create a whole. Elsewhere, he indicates he hopes his book will provide an opportunity for his readers to join in the worship embodied in these poems (2). Consequently, he has chosen works that embody worshipful attitudes, rather than theoretical discussions of doctrine: "In the worship of him a thousand truths are working, unknown and yet active, which, embodied in theory, and dissociated from the living mind that was in Christ, will as certainly breed worms as any omer of hoarded manna" (6). This devotion to the revelation of truths about God is a recurrent theme throughout his commentary in *England's Antiphon*. Of George Herbert, he writes, "If I begin with that which first in the nature of things ought to be demanded of a poet,

namely, Truth, Revelation—George Herbert offers us measure pressed down and running over” (174). He goes on to say that “If the truth, for the sake of which all symbols exist, were indeed the delight of those who claim it, the sectarianism of the church would vanish” (186). From these scattered comments, it becomes clear that, for MacDonald, the forms of literature should be aimed at revealing truth. Everything, from the individual elements such as symbols to the overall import of an entire piece, should work together to present truth.

In his essay “On Polish” (1865), MacDonald acknowledges that “the end of polish is revelation” (183), but says that this definition is incomplete. For him, it “will imply approximately complete revelation of the thought. It will be the removal of everything that can interfere between the thought of the speaker and the mind of the hearer” (184). He further contends that a polished style has no room for “ornament,” by which he means “anything stuck in or on, like a spangle, because it is pretty in itself, although it reveals nothing. Not one such ornament can belong to a polished style” (185). Though MacDonald is not specifically talking about sermon-writing here, Keith Waddle (1999) has suggested that “On Polish” provides useful clues to MacDonald’s attitudes towards sermons (3-5). Likewise, though he is not speaking specifically of fiction, MacDonald’s ideas are applicable to fiction. Everything that goes into the text and is left there after polishing should contribute in some way to making the meaning clear. There should be no extraneous material. Where the purpose is to express or explore eternal truth, everything in the text should contribute to making that expression or exploration understandable.

MacDonald’s sermons are also very telling when it comes to his attitudes towards literary form. Throughout his sermons, MacDonald sometimes meanders into a discussion of form, typically relating to the particular forms used by Christ and by the writers of the New Testament. He notes the mysticism of St. John (“New Name” 67-68) and St. Paul (“Mirrors of the Lord” 448). He touches on the frequently figurative nature of things in the

Bible, claiming that “many things which we see most vividly and certainly are more truly expressed by using a right figure, than by attempting to give them a clear outline of logical expression” (“Love Thine Enemy” 151). Many of these references are brief, but they do signify MacDonald’s awareness of form.

At times, this awareness of form becomes a central point in whatever argument MacDonald is trying to make. For example, in “The Child in the Midst,” MacDonald gives considerable attention to the child singled out by Christ with the instruction that “Whosoever shall receive one such little child in my name receiveth me” (Matt 18.5). In particular, he considers the type of child. Based on the context of the passage, MacDonald concludes that it was “possibly a child of Peter” and that “we might expect the child of such a father to possess [a] childlike countenance and bearing” (2). Then, he perceives a difficulty: “Is it like the *Son of man* to pick out the beautiful child, and leave the common child unnoticed?” (2). MacDonald’s explanation hinges on the particular lesson Christ was trying to illustrate. Of course, MacDonald argues, Christ would never ignore a “common” or unbeautiful child (3): “if the object of our Lord in taking the child in his arms had been to teach love to our neighbour, love to humanity, the ugliest child he could have found, would, perhaps, have served his purpose best” (4). However, MacDonald does not believe this was Christ’s purpose on this occasion. MacDonald’s sermon is based on Christ’s statement that people must “become as little children” and “humble [themselves] as this little child” (Matt. 18.3-4). In this particular incident, Christ was not teaching about love for neighbors, but about childlikeness and humility. Consequently, MacDonald writes, “when the child was employed as a manifestation, utterance, and sign of the truth that lay in his childhood, in order that the eyes as well as the ears should be channels to the heart, it was essential— not that the child should be beautiful but—that the child should be childlike” (5). MacDonald goes on to discuss what it means to be childlike, but this lengthy discussion of the type of

child used is significant in itself. Interestingly, the Bible does not actually describe the child in this passage. MacDonald's entire discussion is based on his own assumptions from the context, and on his reading of Christ's intent. MacDonald assumes that, given Christ's message, the child must have been such as he describes.

MacDonald's discussion clearly demonstrates that he saw a deep connection between a truth and the form in which that truth is embodied. It further shows that he gave great thought to such questions in his reading of and writing about the Bible. In his sermon "The Last Farthing," MacDonald argues that the form of the parable was as important to Christ's message as the content, because it defies intellectual interpretation. He writes that "[t]hey are addressed to the conscience and not to the intellect, to the will and not to the imagination. They are strong and direct, but not definite. They are not meant to explain anything, but to rouse a man to the feeling, 'I am not what I ought to be, but I do not the thing I ought to do!'" (259). MacDonald goes on to argue that parables become intelligible only when a person sets out to do what the parable instructs. He claims that they "are plainly for the teaching of the truth, and yet the Lord speaks of them as for the concealing of it" (261). The reason they appear to conceal the truth from the intellect is because the action is a key part of the truth being illustrated. Where there is no action, the truth is only partially received. Thus, for MacDonald, the form of the parable, with its ability to simultaneously conceal and reveal, is an integral part of the truth contained in the parable. If Christ had used other forms of speaking, the same truth might not have been revealed. This does not mean to suggest that MacDonald himself wrote in parables,²⁸ but it does indicate that he saw a fundamental connection between form and content, between the means of conveying a truth and the truth conveyed.

It is very important to understand what MacDonald means by truth. He does not

²⁸ Though, on at least one occasion, he does adopt the parable form. The story "The Castle," which is included in *Adela Cathcar* (427-41), is subtitled "A Parable."

mean fact, and this distinction becomes important to any discussion of genre in his works, particularly as it relates to questions of realism. Facts are facts; they report things as they are, but this does not make them truths. For something to be a truth, it has to have a greater meaning. MacDonald illustrates, “For instance, it cannot be in itself important whether on a certain morning I took one side of the street or the other. It may be of importance to someone to know which I took, but in itself it is of none. It would therefore be felt unfit if I said, ‘It is *a truth* that I walked on the sunny side.’ The correct word would be *a fact*, not *a truth*” (“The Truth” 460). He further differentiates between a truth and a law (a fact which is always a fact). Using the freezing point of water as his example, he suggests that though a fact may be “invariable” (462), it still is not a truth because it does not rise above the physical nature of things. Truth is something yet higher:

[T]here is a region . . . where yet the word truth may begin to be rightly applied. I believe that every fact in nature is a revelation of God, is there such as it is because God is such as he is; and I suspect that all its facts impress us so that we learn God unconsciously For things as they are, not as science deals with them, are the revelation of God to his children” (463-64).

Truths, for MacDonald, are facts about the nature of God, and “to see one divine fact is to stand face to face with essential eternal life” (“Consuming Fire” 19). Anything pertaining to this world only remains in the realm of fact. Unless those facts lead to higher truths, they remain inert and essentially unimportant.

MacDonald was concerned that too much of popular literature did not move beyond basic facts. In *Annals of a Quiet Neighbourhood* (1867), in which a young clergyman narrates his experiences in his new parish, MacDonald writes, “Now-a-days, the vulgar notion of what is life-like in any annals is to be realised by sternly excluding everything but

the commonplace; and the means, at least, are often attained, with this much of the end as well—that the appearance life bears to vulgar minds is represented with a wonderful degree of success” (91). As discussed in the previous chapter, MacDonald viewed a commonplace attitude towards life as dangerous. Consequently, he did not think highly of a realist approach that focused exclusively on the everyday commonplace facts. However, this does not mean that he can be placed in the romance “camp,” as Robb suggests (“Realism and Fantasy” 275). In *Annals*, he goes on to say that “I believe that this is, at least, quite as unreal a mode of representing life as the other extreme, wherein the unlikely, the romantic, and the uncommon predominate” (91). In another place, he complains about novels in which “the attempt is made to interest us in worthless, commonplace people, whom, if we had our choice, we would far rather not meet at all, by surrounding them with peculiar and extraordinary circumstances; but this is a low source of interest” (“Wordsworth’s Poetry” 261). Nor are works of fantasy immune from his criticism. In an 1861 letter to his wife Louisa, MacDonald complains of several German fairy tales he had been reading, which he felt lacked “the one central spot of red – the wonderful thing which whether in a fairy story or a world, or a human being is the life depth” (Sadler 133). These quotes are revealing; for MacDonald, life is worthwhile only when lived in contact with eternal truths. He writes: “There is nothing for man worthy to be called life, but the life eternal—God’s life, that is, after his degree shared by the man made to be eternal also” (“Life” 308). Otherwise, a person has merely “a life in death” (“Life” 308). Without that contact, a person is dull and uninteresting, and no amount of excitement will change that. Showing a character coming into contact with the ultimate truth is the only thing worth telling.

This is further supported by MacDonald’s comments about biography. Reviewing T.T. Lynch’s *Essays on Some of the Forms of Literature* (1853), MacDonald pays special attention to Lynch’s chapter on biography, noting that “[d]eep is the relation between the

life shadowed forth in biography, and the life in a man's brain which he shadows forth in fiction" ("Forms of Literature" 222). He goes on to focus on his belief that biography too often omits the personal and spiritual struggles that make for a true life (223), but along the way he makes some interesting observations about fiction: "Delightful, surely, it must be . . . to read . . . the embodiment of a man's noblest thought, to follow the hero of his creation through his temptations, contests, and victories, in a world which likewise is—'All made out of the carver's brain'" (222-23).²⁹ Again, MacDonald suggests that what makes a character interesting and worth reading about are the "temptations, contests, and victories." When coupled with his comments about the life of a person (as opposed to a character), it becomes clear that MacDonald views the progress of a person towards a knowledge of and relationship with eternal truth as the only worthwhile subject of literature. Otherwise, it is mere commonplace fact.

Quite simply, for MacDonald, literature must be faithful to truth, not just fact. This includes being true to facts, but it also means seeing through those facts to the higher truths in place. It also means recognizing that truth is higher than fact and includes facts that have not yet been identified. As discussed in the previous chapter, MacDonald saw human knowledge and perception as incomplete; he believed that great mysteries surround what is already known, and he believed that at the heart of those mysteries is the truth that is God. In addition, he believed that the purpose of literature is to educate the imagination towards an understanding of truth, to make the commonplace person become aware of something beyond the commonplace, and to encourage that person to search into that something.

As he claims in the preface to *The Portent* (1864), he seeks to produce literature that is "true to human nature and to itself. Truth to Humanity, and harmony within itself, are almost the sole unvarying essentials of a work of art" (iii). More simply stated than

²⁹ The quotation within the quotation is from Samuel Taylor Coleridge's "Christabel" (line 174).

anywhere else, this is the key to MacDonald's writing. Furthermore, it is the key to answering any questions of form arising from his fiction. MacDonald was hesitant to address these questions himself. It is notable that, in his review of Lynch's book, he virtually ignored Lynch's chapter on fiction,³⁰ and his own "The Fantastic Imagination" was written only after "the repeated request of readers" ("Preface" vi). In that essay, he expresses his hesitation to define a fairy tale lest his own "long past work in that kind might but poorly instance or illustrate my now more matured judgment" ("Fantastic Imagination" 313-14). He never really does define a fairy tale, but he gives a few characteristics. The author of a fairy tale should seek "to move by suggestion, to cause to imagine" (321), to "wake things up that are in [the reader]; or say, to make him think things for himself" (319). This fits in perfectly with MacDonald's assessment of the purpose of literature in general—to educate the imagination. Furthermore, the author must also remain true to moral law (315-16) and to any physical laws established in the world of the story (314-15). This is just another way of saying "Truth to Humanity, and harmony within itself."

MacDonald is speaking of a fairy tale here, but it is clear from his other writings that these characteristics pertain to all fiction. He was not referring to fairy tales in his review of Lynch when he referred to "a world which likewise is—'All made out of the carver's brain'" ("Forms of Literature" 223). MacDonald recognized that all fictional works contain a world within themselves. What matters is that each of those worlds be consistent and harmonious with itself, not with any other world in any other work of literature or in reality. Questions of form become secondary. MacDonald's works span the spectrum from more traditional realism to full fantasy, and various of them fall in different places all along that spectrum. What remains consistent is MacDonald's determination to use his works to

³⁰ Lynch's chapter on Fiction (83-122) extols the potential of fiction for having a positive influence on readers through the embodiment of truth and the idealization of characters. Lynch also discusses the importance of the imagination. In light of MacDonald's subsequent career, this omission seems surprising, but it may be that, at this early date (five years before *Phantastes*), his own views on Fiction may still have been forming. It seems likely that Lynch was influential in the formation of MacDonald's views.

awaken and educate his readers' imaginations.

Genre and MacDonald's Fiction

Consequently, when approaching MacDonald's fiction, the question needs to be not, "what genre is this?" but rather, "what generic forms does MacDonald use in each work to educate his readers' imaginations and is he successful?" Numerous MacDonald critics have noted that both his fantasies and his non-fantasies share a didactic purpose, and frequently, his non-fantasies are cited for their use of images or symbolism similar to those used in the fantasies. But still the perception that they are completely separate types of literature remains, and what is cited as a success in one group is treated as a failure in the other. "Typical" plot structures are treated as perfectly natural in the fantasies (Reis, *George MacDonald* 105), but "typical" plot structures in the non-fantasies are formulaic and unforgivable (Reis 57). Likewise, the loose, episodic structure of *Phantastes* is praised as opening the text to greater possibilities of interpretations (Raeper, *George MacDonald* 145), but the plots of the non-fantasies are condemned for "advancing by fits and starts" (Raeper 195). Recurrent character types in the fantasies are "archetypes," but in the non-fantasies they are "stereotypes" (Reis, *George MacDonald* 115-16) or "stock" characters (Hein, *Harmony Within* 22). "Sermonizing . . . is not out of place in the fairy-tale context," but is "burdensome and officious" in the non-fantasies (Reis 80). As the history of literature shows, generic forms are not binding. MacDonald did not work under twentieth-and-twenty-first century definitions of genre; he worked in an environment where genre definitions were in a state of flux and debate. He would not have felt obligated to make his works conform to specific generic expectations. His works demonstrate that he felt free to use whatever form allowed him to accomplish his purpose. Consequently, the separation and subsequent judgment of MacDonald's works according to guidelines he would likely have disregarded had he known them needs to be re-evaluated. When viewed in the light of

MacDonald's own theories of literature and the imagination, a remarkable unity of form and content, both within individual works and across the oeuvre, emerges.

Chapter Three

Plot Elements in MacDonald's Fiction

Introduction

As the previous chapters have explored, George MacDonald had a keen understanding of his purpose as a writer. His non-fiction clearly reveals that he understood the forms of literature. Even Richard Reis, despite his harsh criticisms of MacDonald's non-fantasies, recognizes that MacDonald "generally had a fairly clear idea of what he was doing and why" (*George MacDonald* 46). Yet because his choices sometimes violate twentieth century ideas of what makes good fiction, MacDonald's literary decisions have been declared invalid, and the works produced by those decisions have been written off as worthless. As detailed in the last chapter, the three most frequently repeated criticisms of MacDonald's non-fantasy fiction are that his plots are repetitive, episodic, and unrealistic; his characters are stereotypes; and his style is overly preachy. While each of these criticisms may appear accurate given a quick, surface reading, a closer look at MacDonald's fiction, both fantasy and non-fantasy, reveals a more complex picture. The elements MacDonald includes in his plots may challenge traditional notions of realism, but each element serves MacDonald's purpose to awaken and educate his readers' imaginations.

MacDonald's Plots, According to His Critics

MacDonald's plots have received much critical attention. Interestingly, this criticism does not readily fall into a fantasies vs. non-fantasies divide. Both types of writing have a tendency to be episodic. William Raeper (1987) claims that "*Phantastes* is not a novel in the accepted sense. It is a novel without a plot" (*George MacDonald* 145). Reis states that "[t]he loose, episodic plot of *Phantastes*, then, is not really tied together very well In many episodes, MacDonald appears to 'forget' these unifying factors . . . and seems to have included some incidents for the sake of mere excitement" (*George MacDonald*

93).³¹ Writing about *Lilith* (1896), John Pennington (2007) has referred to “the plot—if we can call it a plot” (“Thoreau’s Economy” 127). Though critics comment on the episodic nature of the fantasies’ plots, however, this is not generally perceived as a fault in the text, but rather as an integral part of expressing the books’ meaning. As David Robb (1990) contends, “MacDonald, unlike most other novelists, seems at his best and most characteristic when his works progress with a massive, broad, dream-like inconsequentiality The emphasis on plot narrows rather than strengthens the effect of the work” (Robb, “MacDonald’s Scottish Novels” 18). Commenting on one of MacDonald’s inspirations for *Phantastes* (1858), Stephen Prickett (2005) suggests that MacDonald was drawn to Goethe’s *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre* (1796) and *Wilhelm Meisters Wanderjahre* (1821) precisely because “the episodic plots of both novels are constructed around a sense of the larger whole in which it is suggested that there is a hidden order permeating all existence” (*Victorian Fantasy* 185). For Prickett, this “sense of the larger whole” was something MacDonald sought to evoke in his own works; consequently, the episodic plot is a help, not a hindrance to the success of MacDonald’s plans.

Interestingly, however, as mentioned in chapter two, Goethe’s works are not fantasy. They are *Bildungsromane*, set in an approximation of the world in which they were written, which would make them, according to Reis’s definition (*George MacDonald* 27-28), “realism.” Yet for MacDonald’s critics, the episodic nature of his supposed “realist” works is one of their biggest flaws. Raeper claims that “MacDonald’s plots (when there is a plot) echo his sentences, advancing by fits and starts as MacDonald pauses to make asides to his audience” (*George MacDonald* 195). Bonnie Gaarden (2006) notes that “MacDonald’s novels are often faulted for loose and ill-connected plots” (59). Adrian Gunther (1996) accuses MacDonald of being “less successful at putting elements of plot together

³¹ More recent scholarship has argued that there is a unifying structure at work in *Phantastes*. See Roderick McGillis, “The Community of the Centre: Structure and Theme in *Phantastes*” (1992) and Adrian Gunther “The Structure of George MacDonald’s *Phantastes*” (1993).

convincingly” in the non-fantasies (“Fantasy Elements” 12). In other words, what is both acceptable and fundamentally important to the success of the fantasies is unacceptable and detrimental to the non-fantasy works. Nor do MacDonald’s critics stop there. His non-fantasy works are generally criticized for having “creaking theological plots” (Raeper, *George MacDonald* 195). They are called “fantastic—almost irritations” (Raeper, “Missing Year” 9). They are plagued by the “faults” of being “at times Gothic, sensational, and incredible” (Reis, *George MacDonald* 28). Additionally, they “are often superficial, formulaic, and false” (Reis 61). Robert Lee Wolff (1961) calls them “clumsy,” “flat-foot[ed],” (182) and “frequently absurd” (378). For Rolland Hein, “his plots tend to be conventional, predictable, and melodramatic – a lamentable flaw” (*Harmony Within* 115). This litany could easily be continued, but the general idea is clear. For the majority of MacDonald’s critics, the plots of the non-fantasy novels are just plain bad.

The problem with this assessment is that it is based on a critical double standard based on an incorrect assumption. Raeper makes the statement that “MacDonald’s ‘visionary’ works are concerned with ultimate reality – that is, forms of spiritual truth, not the everyday realism of the conventional novel” (*George MacDonald* 208). Implicit in this statement is the suggestion that MacDonald’s non-fantasy works, his “conventional novel[s]” are *not* “concerned with ultimate reality” or “spiritual truth,” that they are only concerned with “everyday realism.” This simply is not the case. As MacDonald’s non-fiction shows, he held the same standards for everything he wrote. It was all a part of the same endeavor—to convey his message about God’s love to his audience by stimulating their imaginations to look in a heavenly direction. His writings on the imagination are clear about his belief that “reality” does, in fact, go far beyond commonplace ideas of existence. His “realist” novels are as interested in that “ultimate reality” as the non-fantasies are. His choices about plot, about the way in which he puts together his stories, should not be

dismissed because they do not conform to anachronistic critical standards about what makes a “good novel.” They should, instead, be viewed through the lens of MacDonald’s beliefs and his purpose. All the attributes that critics disparage—the superficiality, the sensationalism, the conventionality, the absurdity—contribute to the effect of MacDonald’s novels on the imaginations of his readers. A closer look at MacDonald’s plot devices shows that they all work together in his attempt to marvelize the world for his readers, to teach their imaginations to see beyond the commonplaceness of “everyday reality.”

Crime

To educate his readers’ imaginations to see beyond the commonplaceness of “everyday reality,” MacDonald first had to engage their imaginations. He had to get them interested in his stories before he could teach them anything. As his intention was to break them out of commonplace ways of thinking, it makes sense that he would use plot devices which draw upon events that do not happen every day. He uses uncommon events to break his readers out of the commonplace reality of their daily lives. Many of these elements draw on the elements of Gothic and sensationalist fiction and are the same elements that have prompted much of the negative criticism of MacDonald’s non-fantasies. Reis contends that “MacDonald’s conventional novels are at times Gothic, sensational, and incredible, but those are faults in the execution, not in the conception, which at least *aims* at a sense of possibility” (*George MacDonald* 28). Again, this is drawing on a double standard that assumes that a work which is not fantasy *must* be realism. But this is not the case.

In fact, the “realist” tradition was not the only alternative to fantasy to be found in the Victorian age. As discussed in chapter two, various counter-traditions, at least one of which saw itself in “general opposition to realist aesthetics” (Punter, *Literature of Terror* Vol.2:182), were thriving alongside the realist novel. The Gothic novel was one of the most

popular forms of fiction in the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries, and though the extreme popularity of Gothic literature had faded somewhat by the start of the Victorian period, it was still there. As Lyn Pykett (2001) has suggested, “In its various mutated forms, [Gothic] remained a significant presence in the nineteenth-century novel long after the waning of the vogue for gothic romances in the years around the turn of the eighteenth to nineteenth century” (192). The Victorian literary marketplace was full of alternatives to realism: “when Dickens looked around at the models of the popular available in contemporary magazines, what he would have found – as Poe found – was an enormous emphasis on terror; at least nominally derived from the Radcliffean school” (Punter, *Literature of Terror Vol. 1*:188). Furthermore, the mid-nineteenth century was the heyday of the sensation novel. As noted in Chapter Two, Pykett, drawing on Thomas Hardy’s description of his own *Desperate Remedies*, offers a “template for the mid-Victorian sensation novel: a ‘long and intricately inwrought chain of circumstance,’ involving ‘murder, blackmail, illegitimacy, impersonation, eavesdropping, multiple secrets, a suggestion of bigamy, amateur and professional detectives’” (193). MacDonald would have been aware of these different traditions, and he used that knowledge to his advantage. He used sensationalism to attract and hold his readers’ attention so that he could educate their imaginations while they read. MacDonald’s choice to draw upon Gothic and sensational motifs is not “a fault” in his novels; it is a logical choice to help accomplish his purpose.

One of the most frequent plot elements in MacDonald’s fiction is crime. MacDonald was not alone in this; it has been argued that “almost every Victorian novel has at its heart some crime that must be uncovered, some false identity that must be exposed” (Thomas 169). Beginning with the Newgate novels of the early nineteenth century, crime became a

legitimate subject for serious literature. This achievement would be crucial

for the development of the detective novel by figures like Dickens and Collins in the decades to come, just as it would for the industrial novel, the sensation novel, and even the novel of high Victorian realism of mid-century, where crime and intrigue continued to serve as important if not central plot elements. (Thomas 176)

MacDonald shares this trend with his contemporaries; there is a lot of crime in his fiction. It takes place in both the fantasies and the non-fantasies, and while it certainly does add excitement to the stories, it cannot be said that he just threw in criminal elements for their own sake. In nearly every case, these incidents are pivotal moments in the story.

One of the most frequent crimes in MacDonald's fiction is theft. In *David Elginbrod* (1863), Herr von Funkelstein steals two rings and flees to London (277-78). Hugh's pursuit of Funkelstein, to retrieve the rings, is the impetus for his decision to go to London himself, setting up the novel's third volume (302). In *Alec Forbes of Howglen* (1864), Robert Bruce steals a five-pound note from Annie (245). This theft eventually leads to Bruce's public humiliation (406-11). In *Robert Falconer* (1868), Robert's precious violin is stolen by the local shoemaker (159-60) and stolen back by Robert (160-63). Tom Worboise, the protagonist of *Guild Court* (1868) steals from his employer to fund his gambling (228); with this act, Tom's eyes are opened to his own sinfulness, which leads to his repentance and ultimate redemption. A horse is stolen in *St. George and St. Michael* (1876) (188-90). The owner's attempt to get it back is fundamental to the development of the relationship between the hero and the heroine (212-30). Another ring is stolen in *Mary Marston* (1881) (251). This leads, once again, to the ultimate downfall of the novel's villain. Each of these thefts represents a break from the mold of what "should happen" in everyday reality. Though theft is hardly an uncommon crime, it is not something that most people experience on a daily basis. It adds a touch of excitement to the lives of the

characters, and consequently to the lives of the readers, while advancing the plot and giving MacDonald a framework in which to discuss his larger issues.

Another recurrent criminal motif in MacDonald's fiction is the idea of unlawful imprisonment, and subsequent rescue. In *Annals of a Quiet Neighbourhood* (1867), the heroine is held captive in her home by her mother because she refuses to marry according to her mother's wishes. Walton rescues her, giving her the courage to stand up to her mother (544-57). This is a relatively mild case of imprisonment, but it establishes a pattern that will recur throughout MacDonald's fiction. In *Sir Gibbie* (1879), the heroine Ginevra is forcibly kept in her house by the housekeeper, who is under "strict order[s] . . . that she should not set foot across the threshold on any pretext," making her a "prisoner," not the mistress of the house she should have been (246). The house is soon threatened by a flood, however, forcing Ginevra to leave the house after all, helped by Gibbie (247). Several years later, though it is less "formal" an imprisonment, Ginevra is again kept in her home by her father, this time because he is attempting to keep her away from Gibbie and to make her marry someone of his choice (397-419). She is again rescued by Gibbie (420-22). *Donal Grant* (1883) again places its heroine in danger because of a refusal to marry as expected. In this case, Arctura is drugged, chained to a bed in a hidden room, locked in, and left to consider her situation (350-51). As expected, she is rescued by Donal (354-56).

Similarly, MacDonald's books also sometimes feature kidnappings. In *The Princess and the Goblin* (1872), the story revolves around a plot by the goblins to kidnap Irene and marry her off to their prince (175-77). In *Malcolm* (1875), Phemy Mair is taken by the evil Barbara Catanach and held captive as part of a ploy to capture the "mad laird" and return him to the mother who mistreats him (358). In the tale "My Uncle Peter" in *Adela Cathcart*, Peter's adopted daughter is snatched on her way home from school and sold into servitude until she is able to escape (295). *The Vicar's Daughter* (1872) features two

kidnappings. In the book's prequel, *The Seaboard Parish* (1868), Wynnie's parents found and adopted an abandoned baby, whom they named Theodora. In the sequel, several years have passed, and Theodora disappears; she is recovered that evening in the custody of a woman who might be her mother, but who refuses to say anything (*Vicar's Daughter* 57-69). Some time later, Wynnie (the narrator) and her husband return home from an outing to find that their daughter has been taken, as it turns out, by the same woman in retaliation for not being allowed to have her own child (194-213).

MacDonald's books also feature a number of violent incidents. In the fantasies, the goblin attacks in *The Princess and the Goblin* (269-78) and the threats against Curdie and Lina in *The Princess and Curdie* (153-56) stand as examples. Roderick McGillis (1992) also notes that many critics found the violence in the short fairy tale "The Giant's Heart" (1867) to be "excessive" (*For the Childlike* 12), featuring as it does a giant cooking and eating a child ("Giant's Heart" 72) and the poisoning (92) and stabbing (96) of the giant's heart. *Lilith* contains many violent episodes including the attack of the white leech (147-51), Lilith's biting of Vane (189), and the climactic battle which costs Lona her life (263). In the non-fantasies, Hugh Sutherland is attacked by Funkelstein (*David Elginbrod* 287). Alec Forbes is attacked by Beauchamp (334-35). Robert Falconer is attacked by his father (143-44). Barbara Catanach attempts to poison Malcolm (*The Marquis of Lossie* 223), and Sepia tries to poison Mr. Redmain (*Mary Marston* 332-34). At one point, Mary Marston is pursued through the darkness by an unknown assailant with an unknown intent (322-24). In *Castle Warlock* (1882), it is revealed that Lord Mergwain murdered the "auld captain" many years previously (97-98). Criminal incidents abound in MacDonald's novels, just as they did in those of many of his contemporaries.

However, MacDonald does not only use these incidents to add excitement to his novels, although they certainly do add excitement. A closer look at the criminal elements of

one of his novels reveals how MacDonald uses these incidents to help illustrate his larger meaning. Driving part of the plot of *Thomas Wingfold, Curate* (1876) is a murder. Leopold Lingard, the half-brother of the heroine, arrives in the middle of the night, anxious and half-mad, announcing that he has killed someone (105). Under the influence of drugs (127) and extreme jealousy (132), he murdered the woman he was in love with, Emmeline, and fled to his sister for shelter. Wolff has called *Wingfold* MacDonald's "only genuinely immoral novel" (297) because MacDonald's traditional teachings "seem particularly offensive" when placed "[a]gainst the background of violence and illegality" (299). He seems particularly bothered by *Wingfold*'s sympathetic attitude toward Leopold and his harsh judgment of the cruelly flirtatious Emmeline (298). However, John Docherty (2000) argues that Wolff has completely missed the point. It was standard practice for murder victims to be presented as "unattractive personalities" in sensation novels (Docherty, "Limitations" 62). Docherty claims that "much of [Wolff's] misunderstanding of its intellectual structure arises because he also fails to recognise that MacDonald is parodying the conventions of murder-stories written in this style" ("Limitations" 61-62). MacDonald uses elements of the sensation novel/murder mystery, but he uses them for his own purposes.

Thomas Wingfold is not a murder mystery; the murder is not the source of much suspense in the novel. While some of the characters, notably his sister Helen and her suitor George Bascombe, are unsure of Leopold's guilt, the reader knows almost from Leopold's first appearance that he is, indeed, the murderer. The murder, and the ultimate revelation of its details to the other characters in the book, does add a dash of excitement to the plot, but MacDonald is interested in more than simple excitement. He is interested in the spiritual state of the murderer. Much of the central portion of the novel focuses on what Docherty calls "the resurrection of the soul of a murderer" ("Limitations" 62); it is about Leopold's redemption and about how MacDonald uses that process to address the spiritual conditions

of his readers. It should be noted that the sympathetic attitude condemned by Wolff is not actually towards Leopold's crime, but rather towards a Leopold who is writhing under intense and understandable guilt. He has committed a terrible crime. He recognizes that, and he expects that any God worth the name would have no choice but "to damn [him] for ever and ever as one of the blackest creatures in creation" (245). In his agony of conscience, he turns to Wingfold for advice. Leopold is already leaning towards surrendering himself to the authorities, despite his sister's protestations. Wingfold further guides him in that direction by first making Leopold see his duty towards God, which is repentance, and from that, his duty towards his fellow man, which is to "make all possible reparation" (256). Eventually, Leopold declares, "Helen, if I were to go up to the throne of God with the psalm in my mouth, and say to him, 'Against thee, thee only, have I sinned,' it would be false; for I have sinned against every man, woman, and child in England at least, and I will repudiate myself. To the throne of God I want to go, and there is no way thither for me but through the gate of the law" (310). Ultimately, he is prevented from doing so by the machinations of his sister and Bascombe and the illness which eventually kills him, but he is a completely different person when he dies. MacDonald uses Leopold to illustrate God's forgiveness.

More than that, however, MacDonald wants his readers to question their pre-conceived ideas about themselves. Wingfold observes that "For the greatest fool and rascal in creation there is yet a worse condition, and that is not to know it, but think himself a respectable man" (281). Later, he states:

Who that reflects can fail to see this at least: that a crime brings a man face to face with the reality of things? He who knows himself a sinner . . . knows in himself that he is a lost man. He can no more hold up his head among his kind; he cannot look a woman or a child in the face; he cannot be left alone

with the chaos of his thoughts and the monsters it momentarily breeds

Therefore surely is such a man nearer to the gate of the kingdom than he against whom the world has never wagged a tongue, who never sinned against a social custom even, and has as easy a conscience as the day he was born, but who knows so little of himself that, while he thinks he is good enough, he carries within him the capacity and possibility of every cardinal sin, waiting only the special and fitting temptation which, like the match to the charged mine, shall set all in a roar. (336)

Essentially, Wingfold tells his parish, and MacDonald tells his readers, that a murderer, a person who has committed what many people consider to be one of the worst of sins, is better off than they are in their smug, commonplace self-satisfaction. By juxtaposing a passage like this with the story of Leopold, he asks his readers to examine their own lives and to revise their thinking about right and wrong. He uses the standard Victorian trope of crime, but he uses that standard form to serve his own non-standard purposes of educating his readers and changing their way of looking at the world around them.

This is further underlined by MacDonald's frequent depiction of actual crime juxtaposed with a form of "legal crime," the practice of being slightly less than honest in business dealings. This occurs throughout his oeuvre, in the behavior of many of his shopkeepers and businessmen. Incidents occur in *Alec Forbes of Howglen* (426), *Guild Court* (241-42), *The Vicar's Daughter* (305-07), *The Marquis of Lossie* (2-4), *Mary Marston* (285-86), and *Castle Warlock* (164-66). In *Annals of a Quiet Neighbourhood* (1867), MacDonald presents an interesting reverse of this pattern, featuring a character who is fired from his job in a shop because of his excessive honesty (254-59). Even in *Thomas Wingfold*, where the actual crime is so severe, he presents the example of Mr. Drew, who comes to Wingfold seeking advice because he is "not altogether at ease in [his] own mind as

to the way [he has] made [his] money” (194). He elaborates: “Mind, I do not confess to having done anything the trade would count inadmissible, or which is not done in the largest establishments. What I now make question of I learned in one of the most respectable of London houses” (194). Though what he has done is perfectly legal, and even expected, Mr. Drew begins to question whether or not he has been entirely honest in his approach to business. In thus linking a common business practice to crime, MacDonald asks his readers to expand their ways of thinking beyond commonplace attitudes towards right and wrong, to view these questions from an eternal perspective, rather than an earthly. He does not believe, as Wolff argues, that “[t]he very act of buying and selling [is] evil in itself” (320). He simply wants his readers to consider, as Mr. Drew does, “How would Jesus have done if he had been a draper instead of a carpenter?” (196). The incidents of crime occurring throughout MacDonald’s oeuvre are intended to do more than just add excitement. They are part of opening his readers’ imaginations and of illustrating his key ideas.

Natural Disasters

MacDonald believed in the beauty of nature. He believed that a familiarity with nature was one of the best ways for an imagination to come into contact with its Creator (“The Imagination” 37). His works frequently discuss the beauties of nature and the ways in which those beauties can bring a person into contact with eternal reality. However, MacDonald recognized that nature has another side; it is powerful and can sometimes seem cruel. But just as God is in the beauties of nature, he is also in the powers of nature. In *Miracles of Our Lord*, MacDonald explains:

In the grand process of existence, destruction is one of the phases of creation; for the inferior must ever be giving way for the growth of the superior: the husk must crumble and decay, that the seed may germinate and appear. As the whole creation passes on towards the sonship, death must ever be doing

its sacred work about the lower regions, that life may ever arise triumphant, in its ascent towards the will of the Father. ("Miracles of Destruction" 418)

The destructive aspect of nature is part of bringing about God's ultimate will on earth. In MacDonald's novels, nature's destructiveness is a part of bringing his characters, and by extension his readers, into a better understanding of reality and of the God at the center of it.

MacDonald's novels frequently feature a powerful thunderstorm, and with it a transcendent experience for at least one of the characters. In *Malcolm*, Florimel's first experience of being outside in a storm has a marked effect on her imagination: "[The storm] took such sympathetic hold of her imagination, that she flung out her arms, and began to dance and whirl as if herself the genius of the storm" (89). Walton, in *Annals of a Quiet Neighbourhood*, talks about the "exaltation" he gets from fighting with a "thoroughly roused storm of wind and snow or rain" (398). Donal Grant experiences an intense storm while living in Castle Graham (*Donal Grant* 134-35). Gibbie, after leaving the city for the first time, climbs to the top of a mountain and experiences a storm (*Sir Gibbie* 83-85). Although Gibbie has no concept of God at this time (83), he senses something extraordinary in the storm. MacDonald writes, "The tumult at last seized Gibbie like an intoxication; he jumped to his feet and danced and flung his arms about as if he himself were the storm" (84). It is a transcendent experience to which, in later life, Gibbie returns as often as there is a storm (220-21). In each of these events, the storm causes the person to experience God's creation, and through that creation, God himself, in uncommon, un-everyday ways, reminding MacDonald's readers that they can do the same.

MacDonald frequently takes this idea a step further, however. Besides simply showing the potential power of nature, he often demonstrates the pure destructive power of nature. As a young child, MacDonald experienced the Moray Floods of 1829 (Raeper, *George MacDonald* 28), and this experience remained with him throughout his life. This

destruction appears throughout his works in various ways. *A Rough Shaking* (1891) opens with an earthquake in Italy, which leaves young Clare orphaned and sets his journey in motion (43-44). *David Elginbrod* (81-87) and *Castle Warlock* (72-99) both feature blizzards. *Alec Forbes of Howglen* (281-93), *Paul Faber* (306-26), and *Sir Gibbie* (220-268) contain large floods, as do *Phantastes* (249-51) and *The Princess and the Goblin* (298-306). In addition, he includes several shipwrecks caused by severe storms. Most of these take place outside of the primary narrative and are related by other characters. Alec Forbes is shipwrecked in *Alec Forbes* (438-39). The Boxall family is killed when their ship goes down in *Guild Court* (157). North Wind intends to sink a ship in *At the Back of the North Wind* (61). *The Seaboard Parish* actually features a major shipwreck in the narrative (532-57).

Reis calls MacDonald's use of these disasters his "most characteristic source of excitement" (*George MacDonald* 60). He goes on to give the following explanation for MacDonald's use:

(It is possible to regard his preoccupation with gratuitous natural disasters as an attempt to justify God's ways to man . . . since MacDonald's optimistic insistence upon the necessity of even the most manifestly cruel worldly events here receives its sternest challenge. It is more likely, however, that sheer excitement is reason enough for the inclusion of such events in popular novels.) (60)

This comment is interesting in many ways. First of all, it is a parenthetical aside, suggesting that MacDonald's reasons for using this device are not important enough to actually discuss. Second, it suggests that a plot device cannot be used to add excitement *and* discuss an important topic at the same time. This is ridiculous. Given MacDonald's overriding concerns, it seems likely that theodicy is at least part of his intention with these

incidents. It is also quite clear that he does, in fact, use these events to add excitement. For the purposes of this study, however, it is most interesting to see how MacDonald uses these events to reinforce his belief that there is more going on in the world than meets the eye.

Essentially, though MacDonald presents a clear look at the power of nature, and with it the power of God, he never presents power without control. The reader always gets the sense that God is present in whatever is happening. God's hand is always visible. Clare survives the earthquake; it is not a coincidence or an accident (48). Hugh miraculously rescues Margaret Elginbrod from the blizzard in *David Elginbrod*; he has no memory of how he did it. The suggestion is that he did not do it of his own power (85-86). In *Castle Warlock*, the blizzard brings Lady Joan and her father, Lord Mergwain, to Castle Warlock (75-79). It is not Mergwain's first time there; as a much younger man, he visited the castle and committed murder (97-98). While this could be read as a coincidence, it could just as easily be read as though a larger plan is in motion. The floods in *Alec Forbes* (290), *Paul Faber* (324-25) and *Sir Gibbie* (247-49) all feature dramatic, last second rescues, and there is always the underlying current of Providential guidance at work. The same is true of the various shipwrecks throughout MacDonald's novels. These events never just happen. There is a force at work behind them.

Perhaps this becomes most clear in *At the Back of the North Wind*. North Wind informs Diamond that "her work" for the evening is to "take an East Indiaman by the royals, twist her round and push her under" (61). It is not something she wants to do; it is something she must do. She does not know where her work comes from, but she knows she has to do it: "[W]hen I do it, I feel all right, and when I don't I feel all wrong" (59). As the rest of the book clearly indicates, there is a larger purpose behind the sinking of the ship. It causes Diamond's father's employer to lose all his money, which leads to the relocation of Diamond's family to the city and opens the door for Diamond to become a force for good in

the London slums (149 and following). It also leads to the employer becoming a better person (246-47). *The Seaboard Parish* is another good example of this. As Walton describes the response of the people on land to the shipwreck, the possibility arises that the man with whom his eldest daughter has fallen in love, Percivale, has drowned trying to help with the rescue (545-46). However, Walton assures his readers that everything turns out fine. He does not do this when it is over, but while it is still happening, giving the reader information that the characters did not yet have (549-50). This eliminates the possibility that this was merely an attempt to add suspense; on the contrary, MacDonald uses this event to show that, even in the midst of a disaster, God's protective hand is still active. Speaking to a young woman whose husband's fate is likewise known to the reader, but not to the characters, Walton reminds her that her husband "was and is about his Father's business, and you must not be anxious about him. There could be no better reason for not being anxious" (551). When he tells his daughter that Percivale is most likely safe, and she expresses her doubts, he tells her, "Wynnie, look what your faithlessness brings upon you . . . Of course there is room for doubt—but none for despair. See what a poor helpless creature hopelessness makes you" (556). These natural disasters are very exciting. They help to engage MacDonald's readers. But as with the incidents of crime, these disasters also help to teach them that there are invisible forces, specifically the hand of God, at work in their lives and encourages them to remember those forces even when things seem hopeless and lost.

Supernatural Elements

Reis argues that it is possible to separate MacDonald's works into fantasy or realism based on "the presence or absence of the supernatural: the fantasies are filled with ghosts and spirits, witches and demons, fiends and fairies, talking animals and sentient plants," while, presumably, the non-fantasies are not (*George MacDonald* 28). Subsequent critics,

however, have recognized that MacDonald's use of the supernatural is not confined to the fantasies, but in fact pervades his entire oeuvre (Raeper, *George MacDonald* 198), further complicating Reis's easy classification of these works as "realist." For MacDonald, looking for ways to marvelize the world around him, the supernatural provided a means of infusing that world with elements from a heightened sense of reality.

Ghosts

One of the most frequent supernatural devices in MacDonald's works is the presence of ghosts. MacDonald possessed a life-long interest in the idea of ghosts. As one of his biographers has noted, "[t]he harsh local history of Huntly, which included warlocks, ghosts and ruined castles, remained part of MacDonald's adult novel world" (Raeper, *George MacDonald* 311). As a student, MacDonald "raised a few eyebrows by introducing a debate on the existence of ghosts," something in which MacDonald believed (Raeper 67). As with many things, ghosts represented the existence of a world beyond that which is discernible by the senses; consequently, it makes sense that his efforts to show his readers that world would involve visitors from it.

Interestingly, MacDonald's first major work of prose fiction, the fantasy *Phantastes* (1858), shies away from ghostly presences. Throughout the book, several things are described as being "ghostly." The ash tree is a "ghostly apparition," but it is still a tree (53). Anodos's shadow is described as "a runner, but with ghostly feet" (105). This indicates that the feet are quiet, not that the shadow is an actual ghost. The fairy palace "glimmer[s] ghostly in the moonlight" (126). The light is described as having a "ghostly" appearance in several places (246, 280). The only actual ghost during Anodos' journey appears in the interpolated "Ballad of Sir Aglovaile" (229-34), a song sung to Anodos by the Old Woman of the Cottage. There are no ghosts in Fairy Land. It is not until Anodos has left Fairy Land and returned to this world that the suggestion of an actual ghost enters the narrative—

Anodos himself. He says, “I have the strange feeling sometimes, that I am a ghost, sent into the world to minister to my fellow men, or rather, to repair the wrongs I have already done” (318). Anodos’s travels through Fairy Land, including his death (308), have so changed Anodos that he feels like a ghost when he returns to this world. His contact with a world beyond his initial commonplace existence³² has increased his awareness of a deeper reality to the point where he no longer feels like a part of the “common life” (317). Because Fairy Land itself represents a reality beyond the everyday, Anodos’s experiences there do make him a sort of ghost when he returns to this world—he has returned from the beyond. Though he is not an actual ghost, his choice to refer to himself in such terms ties in with MacDonald’s belief that what is needed in this world is contact with the other. Similarly, the only “ghost” in *Lilith* appears in Vane’s library (11-13). The ghost of the “old librarian,” however, is not a ghost in the traditional sense; he is Mr. Raven, whose primary existence is in the parallel world to which Vane travels. His relationship to a reality external to the one of Vane’s library has caused him to be perceived in this reality as a ghost.

In the non-fantasies MacDonald turned to after *Phantastes* proved commercially unsuccessful, he continues to use ghosts to impress upon his readers the existence of another level of reality. His first attempt at a full-length, non-fantasy novel, *David Elginbrod* (1863), features a ghost prominently in the novel. The first suggestion of anything ghostly comes shortly after Hugh Sutherland’s arrival at Arnstead, when his pupil Harry Arnold is showing him the estate. They come across an avenue on the grounds, which Hugh wishes to explore, but Harry stops him, warning “They call it the Ghost’s walk It’s not safe, they say, to cross her path. She always follows any one who crosses her path” (194). “She” is the ghost of Lady Euphrasia Halkar. Servants report seeing her in the

³² The process of Anodos’s imaginative education will be discussed in more detail in Chapter Four.

hallways (143). A blue light shines in the window of her room (145, 220). Her namesake, Euphrasia (Euphra) Cameron, tells Hugh that “it is said, she cannot lie still” (144). Some time later, Hugh and Euphra meet in the library to discuss Italian. Three sudden, unexplainable taps on the window interrupt their discussion (174). Though startled, Hugh soon laughs it off, only to be doubly surprised when it happens again a few days later (199). Lady Euphrasia’s ghost is seen in the Ghost’s walk (229, 234, 239-40). Eventually, after accepting a wager to spend the night in the haunted room, Hugh comes face to face with Lady Euphrasia herself:

He started awake in that agony of fear in which I suppose most people have awaked in the night, once or twice in their lives. He felt that he was not alone He saw, a few paces off, bending as if looking down upon him, a face The lips were dark, and drawn back from the closed teeth, which were white as those of a skull. There were spots—in fact, the face corresponded exactly to the description given by Funkelstein of the reported ghost of Lady Euphrasia. The dress was point for point correspondent to that in the picture. Had the portrait of Lady Euphrasia been hanging on the wall above, instead of the portrait of the unknown nun, Hugh would have thought, as far as dress was concerned, that it had come alive, and stepped from its frame. (254-65).

This is a terrifying encounter, for the reader as well as for Hugh.

In the end, Lady Euphrasia’s ghost turns out to have a rational, non-supernatural explanation. In giving his ghost a natural explanation, MacDonald draws upon an established literary tradition. MacDonald was neither the first nor the last author to use supernatural sleight-of-hand to present events which seem supernatural, but ultimately are not. This technique was made famous by Ann Radcliffe and was, in fact, a frequent attribute of Gothic fiction. However, as Punter argues, “even if the ghosts are eventually

explained away, this does not mean that their actual presence within the text can be forgotten” (Punter, *Literature of Terror Vol. 1*:10). Until the ghost is explained away, the suggestion of and belief in the ghost adds to the texture and tone of the novel. It adds mystery and produces an emotional reaction in the reader that is real, whether the ghost turns out to be real or not. It is likely that MacDonald encountered this technique in many places as a reader, but one good example can be found in Walter Scott’s *Rob Roy* (1817). The library at Osbaldistone Hall is believed by many in the household to be haunted. Unaccountable “sights and sounds” have been reported (178), and one of the household, Rashleigh Osbaldistone, is rumored to have been having conversations with an unknown something after the rest of the house has gone to bed (179). Shadows have been seen in the windows that should not be there (180). Mysterious footprints have appeared on the ground (197). At least one character, Andrew Fairservice, attributes it all to a “bogle,”³³ which he has personally encountered (212). It is not a major plot point in the novel, and the narrator tends to dismiss Fairservice’s concerns as superstition with a “Pooh! Pooh!” (214). Nonetheless, the suggestion adds an air of mystery to the story that would not otherwise be there. When the “bogle” is revealed to be a flesh-and-blood human in disguise (485), it does not eliminate the effect of the earlier passages on the reader. Likewise, MacDonald’s Lady Euphrasia may have a natural explanation, but this does not diminish the effect of this experience on MacDonald’s reader. These ghostly manifestations are one of the key methods MacDonald uses in *David Elginbrod* for moving his story along and holding his readers’ interest.

MacDonald also presents ghosts that cannot be explained, however. In *Donal Grant* (1883), Castle Graham is reputed to be haunted. On his first night there, Donal hears a ghostly sound resonating through the castle. It is described as “a long-drawn musical

³³ A ghost.

moan” (53). With the help of the novel’s heroine Arctura, Donal traces the source of the ghostly music to the castle roof, where an Aeolian harp has been constructed across what appears to be an unused chimney (209). While the ghost music is shown to have a natural explanation, it is by no means the end of the ghostliness. The castle has another ghostly inhabitant, one which manifests in a nightly “succession of quick knocks . . . like a knocking of knuckles against the other side of the wall” (274). After discovering a secret room containing the remains of a woman and child apparently murdered, Donal and Arctura are explaining their discovery to the housekeeper when the knocking occurs. Donal is surprised, but both Arctura and the housekeeper Mrs. Brookes claim that the knocks have been a regular occurrence for as long as they can remember. Mrs. Brookes tells Donal and Arctura about an experience she had when she was much younger, of a very real haunting in another castle (275-85). This story is followed by more knocking. They conclude that this ghost wants to be buried (287). Though one of *Donal Grant*’s ghostly manifestations turns out to have a rational explanation, the other turns out to be a real ghost. In both cases, however, the suggestion of a ghost, whether it turns out to be real or not, catapults the reader’s imagination out of commonplace reality and into a different realm.³⁴

This is a technique MacDonald uses throughout his oeuvre. In *Robert Falconer* (1868), a local factory that has fallen into disrepair is reportedly haunted. In this case, the reader is aware of the ghost’s identity from the beginning. It is Robert himself, whose use of the factory as a place for violin practice has given rise to the stories around town (93). Though the reader knows from the beginning that the “ghost” is actually Robert, MacDonald’s evocation of ghostliness makes the old factory “a space in which the commonplace can be transcended” (Hayward, “Truth and Appearances” 20). Several scenes which question the nature of reality are thus situated. In *Malcolm* (1875), a

³⁴ Portions of this paragraph have been adapted from my paper “George MacDonald, *Donal Grant*, and the Scottish Gothic,” which was presented at the Scottish Gothic Symposium at the University of Stirling, 24 October, 2009.

particular room in the manor house is said to be haunted by the spirit of Lord Gernon, an “ancient lord of Lossie” (162), who had a reputation for having “dealings with Satan” (163). He died under mysterious circumstances, and since his death, members of the household reported hearing strange noises coming out of his room (166). MacDonald uses a similar device in *Castle Warlock* (1882), where the “auld captain,” a relative with questionable morals and a violent death, is said to haunt the castle (37-40). In *St. George and St. Michael* (1876), Dorothy initially believes she sees Richard’s ghost when he enters the castle by night. She refers to him as a “phantom” and a “spectre,” thinking that he must be “dead, slain in battle . . . come to pay her a last visit ere he left the world” (212). *Thomas Wingfold’s* Leopold believes he sees the ghost of his victim Emmeline (267-68). Though many of these ghostly manifestations are later explained, MacDonald nonetheless uses them to cast an air of mystery and super-reality over the world of the novel and the imaginations of his readers.

Second Sight/Prophetic Insight

Another recurrent supernatural motif in MacDonald’s fiction is the idea of the second sight or prophetic insight. Westwood and Kingsill (2009) describe the second sight as “the ability to see events at a distance, either in space or in time” (474). These visions frequently portend death, and take numerous forms, such as a vision of a ghostly funeral or a figure in a shroud (Spence 162). However, “the apparition of a woman standing beside a man (or vice versa)” was sometimes taken to predict a future marriage (Spence 162-63). This is not an exclusively Scottish idea; however “the history of Second Sight in Scotland is so distinct in its outlines and so abundant in its instances and illustrations as to surpass all recorded examples of it in other parts of the globe” (Spence 15-16). In Scotland, it was believed that the Second Sight was a gift of the fairies (Spence 92), and at least as late as Samuel Johnson’s *Journey to the Western Isles of Scotland* (1775), it was something almost

“universally” acknowledged by those living in the Highlands (Johnson 186). Consequently, the second sight is a long-standing feature of Scottish literature and folklore.

MacDonald cherished his Scottish heritage. He was “proud of his ancestry” (Docherty, “The Portent” 20). His son Ronald (1911) describes that “In George MacDonald’s blood the Gael at least preponderated very largely; and I cannot doubt that the tradition which existed in his family of escape from the Glencoe massacre affected his imagination strongly, giving him a heart equally open to the Highland and the Lowland appeal” (42). He was even known to don full Highland dress on certain occasions (Greville MacDonald 76). MacDonald’s *The Portent* (1864) is his most in-depth exploration of the second sight. In the dedicatory preface addressed to his father’s friend Duncan McColl, he says the story is “founded on *The Second Sight*, the belief which was common to our ancestors” (ii). *The Portent* is the story of Duncan Campbell,³⁵ who grows up in the Highlands, with a nurse who claims to possess the second sight. When he gets older, he goes to be a tutor and meets Lady Alice, with whom he falls in love. As they plan to run away and get married, they are discovered by Alice’s family and stopped. He is sent away and joins the army, where he is wounded in action. Eventually, he goes looking for Alice again, finds her, marries her, and lives happily ever after. There is much more to *The Portent* however. What sets this novel apart is MacDonald’s use of the second sight.

From the beginning, Duncan claims to possess “an unusual delicacy of hearing, which often conveys to [him] sounds inaudible to those about [him]” (4). This “second hearing” allows him to hear the sound of a horse’s hooves, with a loose shoe, riding nearby, despite that there was “no road lying so that, if a horse were galloping upon it, the sounds

³⁵ The choice to name his central character Campbell is significant for a MacDonald who cherished his family history and had strong feelings about the Glencoe Massacre of 1692, in which the Campbells slaughtered thirty-eight members of the MacDonald clan. John Docherty (1994) has suggested that the use of this name casts doubt on the standard interpretations of *The Portent* and that much of the second half of the book is actually a figment of Duncan’s deranged imagination (“The Portent” 19-23). However, as the hero of *Malcolm* and *The Marquis of Lossie*, Malcolm Colonsay, is a Campbell on his mother’s side and is one of MacDonald’s most idealized characters, Docherty’s conclusion is debatable.

would be reflected from the mountain to [him]” (8). He goes to his old nurse, who possesses the second sight (9), and tells her what he heard, which frightens her because the sound generally presages doom to some part of the family (10-11). His nurse explains that many generations ago, two brothers fell in love with the same woman, and it ended with all three of them going over a cliff (18-19).³⁶ Their spirits still haunt the area, and whenever a member of the family hears the horse with the loose shoe, something bad follows (20-21). She further tells him that the sound was heard twice during his birth, and again a week later, just before his mother died after a long struggle with an invisible, malevolent force (23). The nurse concludes by speculating

What if my Duncan be the youth whom his wicked brother hurled into the ravine, come again in a new body, to live out his life on the earth, cut short by his brother’s hatred? If so, his persecution of you, and of your mother for your sake, is easy to understand. And if so, you will never be able to rest till you find your fere,³⁷ wherever she may have been born on the face of the earth. For born she must be, long ere now, for you to find. (25)

Sure enough, when Duncan encounters Lady Alice, she has also heard the clanking shoe before and during times of trouble (54). Duncan and Alice discover that they were born under very similar circumstances, at apparently the same moment, and their mothers died on the same day (91). They make their plans to run away together, only to hear the clanking shoe again just before being discovered by Alice’s guardian (92). Duncan is driven away; he later finds out that Alice was ill and was taken away where he would not be able to find her (93). He goes off to be a soldier, gets wounded at the Battle of Waterloo (1815), and sees a vision of Alice in what he later discovers to be a madhouse, although subsequent

³⁶ The chapter in which this story is told, “My Old Nurse’s Tale,” is the only piece by MacDonald selected for inclusion in a recent volume of *Scottish Ghost Stories* (2009), edited by Rosemary Gray.

³⁷ Companion, wife.

visits do not reveal any sign of her (94). He searches far and wide, but does not find her.³⁸

Time passes, and eventually Duncan returns to visit his old nurse, who tells him that she has been keeping an eye on him all these years (112). She uses her second sight to find Alice (121-22), telling Duncan she is at her home. Duncan goes and finds that Alice has no memories of the intervening years until, once again, they hear the sound of the clanking shoe (157). This time, they make their escape, get married, and live happily ever after (159-62).

The Portent is somewhat unusual among MacDonald's non-fantasies because the supernatural episodes drive the story more centrally than in most of his other non-fantasies, where they contribute to parts more than the whole. The entire novel revolves around the second sight as a real thing. Reis says that it "is accepted as a matter-of-fact natural phenomenon and treated in a perfectly realistic manner" (*George MacDonald* 59). Reis seems surprised by this supernaturalism, coming as it does in a supposedly "realist" novel, and by the fact that MacDonald makes no attempt to "explain it away" (59).³⁹ The result is that *The Portent* is more mysterious and bizarre than MacDonald's other work. By doing this, MacDonald asks his readers to accept an expanded reality in a more extreme form.

The Portent has a recognizable setting—first Scotland, then England, and eventually Continental Europe and back again—and a recognizable place in known history, established by Duncan's involvement in Waterloo. But into that recognizable place and time, MacDonald introduces a truly supernatural element. By treating that supernatural element

³⁸ The original serialized version of *The Portent* ends here, with Duncan's agonized cry that "They say that Time and Space exist not, save in our thoughts. If so, then that which has been, is, and the Past can never cease. She is mine, and I shall find her—what matters it where, or when, or how? Till then, my soul is but a moon-lighted chamber of ghosts; and I sit within, the dreariest of them all. When she enters, it will be a home of love. And I wait—I wait" (95). However, when preparing *The Portent* for publication as a book, MacDonald was encouraged by his publishers to revise the ending, and make it happier (Docherty, "The Portent" 22). For more about this change, see Rebecca Ankeny (1998), "Endings and Meanings: A Study of George MacDonald's *The Portent*."

³⁹ There are a couple of references at the very end of the novel to the fact that, once settled into a relatively "normal" life, Duncan and Alice begin to question their earlier interpretation of those events (161), but Duncan insists that there are some points in the story that simply cannot be explained away (161), and in the end, these passing references do little to undermine the effect of the novel as a whole.

as completely natural and making it a fundamental driving force of the novel, MacDonald presents an expanded version of reality.

Moreover, while the second sight may be more central to the plot here, *The Portent* is not the only novel in which this idea of special insight into people and events appears. In *Donal Grant*, Donal is awoken by his mother, Janet, in the middle of the night and told that he needs to return to Castle Graham immediately. When he asks how she knows, she says “It wad be ill tellin’ ye But gien I was you, Donal, I wad be aff afore the day brak, to see what they’re duin’ wi’ yon puir leddy at the muckle place ye left” (344). Donal returns to the castle just in time to rescue Arctura. His mother had no natural way of knowing there was trouble; she just *knew* that he was needed. Donal speculates briefly about this, because he has never known his mother to have the second sight. Given MacDonald’s religious views and his portrait of Janet as a deeply spiritual woman, it is equally likely that Janet’s insight is a form of divine intervention in the lives of the characters. MacDonald leaves the source of Janet’s vision intentionally vague, adding even more to the supernatural air hanging over the tale.

This type of prophetic insight also shows up in *Alec Forbes of Howglen*, albeit in a somewhat altered form. MacDonald writes that “A spirit of prophecy, whether from the Lord or not, was abroad this summer among the clergy of Glamerton, of all persuasions” (236). He goes on to describe how it spreads throughout the town until everyone is prophesying doom and gloom on everyone else and the town as a whole (236-37). Eventually, this culminates in the fear of a bad harvest (256). When the harvest proves to be better than most years (272), the prophecies simply change form, until

a placard was found affixed to the doors of every place of worship in the town, setting forth in large letters that, according to certain irrefragable calculations from ‘the number of a man’ and other such of the more definite

utterances of Daniel and St. John, the day of judgment must without fail fall upon the next Sunday week. Whence this announcement came no one knew.
(274)

MacDonald's portrayal of these prophecies is almost humorous. He describes it all in a slightly tongue-in-cheek, satirical manner. He describes the people of the town suddenly interpreting every, single Biblical prophecy as if it is directly related to them (237). He calls it a "passion for prophecy" and a "spiritual epidemic" (272). He describes a peddler who profits from this rage (272-73). He acknowledges that the people of Glamerton prefer the mystery of who posted the prophecy to knowing who it was, because the uncertainty is more "congenial to such things" (274). The overall implication is that this prophetic streak is not to be taken too seriously. But the very Sunday specified by the prophecy turns out to be the day of the Glamerton flood that takes the lives of three people, almost takes the life of the heroine, and causes a great deal of widespread damage. Either the prophecy had some truth in it, or the flood was a tremendous coincidence. In either case, MacDonald's use of prophecy suggests to his readers that something more is going on.

Folklore and Magic

Folklore and magic are also present in various ways throughout MacDonald's fiction. Drawing on an incident in MacDonald's *Ranald Bannerman's Boyhood* (1871), David Robb (2008) speculates:

I have little doubt that in some such way as this MacDonald himself imbibed many a legend and folk-tale, both Highland and Lowland, during his childhood, and I suspect such scenes of being another major source of the wonder and fairy-matter which so distinguishes his writing Even a brief survey of some of this material, however, reveals . . . that MacDonald must have lived his Huntly childhood in a world in which belief in fairies was not

the habit of another, earlier and far more distant age than we perhaps assume, but a more recent element in people's minds which must still have been contributing strands to the fabric of the communal outlook. ("Scottish Sources" 19-20)

This indebtedness to folklore is fairly obvious in MacDonald's fantasies and fairy tales.

Phantastes features flower fairies (34), tree spirits (48-60, 79-86), magical enchantments (65-72), an ogress (101-07), a shadow that attaches itself to Anodos (106, and elsewhere), goblin fairies (119), the Fairy Palace where things are carried by unseen hands (130) and the statues dance (191-98), doorways that are actually portals to other places (236-50), and giants (265-69). In *At the Back of the North Wind* (1871), Diamond travels with the wind (13 and elsewhere). The title character of *The Wise Woman* (1875) has magical properties, as does her house. The story of *The Princess and the Goblin* (1872) is rooted in a conflict between humans and goblins and the presence of the Great-Great-Grandmother, a magical being. In addition, the plot of the goblins to kidnap Princess Irene to marry the goblin prince may have its roots in a long folkloric tradition of stealing women to become wives, both in fact and in fairy legend (Black lxviii-lxxvi). *The Princess and Curdie* (1882) features fantastic creatures, a boy who can judge people's characters by touching their hands (96-99), and a woman who can transform herself into different guises (55-60). The shorter fairy tales are full of magical enchantments and encounters with mythical creatures like fairies and giants. In the fantasies, these are some of the elements MacDonald draws on to create his fantasy worlds.

Even in the non-fantasies, those ostensibly set in this world, MacDonald does not completely dismiss the ideas of magic and folklore. His use of it changes to fit the altered setting, but he continues to evoke a sense of magic and folklore. The temperamental and difficult horse in *The Marquis of Lossie* is named "Kelpie," invoking the idea of the Scottish

horse-shaped water spirit known to lure people into deadly traps (Westwood and Kingshill 364-65). It is a suitable name, as she proves to be quite dangerous (*Marquis* 14, and elsewhere). In *Annals of a Quiet Neighbourhood*, Walton describes himself as being “enchanted” (413) and “under a spell” (417); it seems to be the only way he can account for his uncharacteristic loss of temper towards one of his parishioners. Similarly, throughout *Mary Marston*, Sepia Yolland’s eyes are described as having an almost magical power over men (208). She is compared to a variety of mythical or supernatural creatures throughout the novel as well: a vampire (153), a kraken (222), and the devil (315). In *Sir Gibbie*, Gibbie, having traveled from Aberdeen into the countryside hides himself in the attic of a house. From there, he can see how the lady of the house goes about her business, and he begins to emulate her, preparing the kitchen before she arrives in the morning. Eventually, he expands his efforts to include helping with the grooming of the horses before the men of the place arrive. Unable to determine the source of the help, they conclude it must be the work of a Brownie (103-15).⁴⁰ This suggestion causes Donal Grant to reconsider the Scottish folklore he had heard as a child, “to open to his imagination vista after vista into the realms of might-be possibility—where dwelt whole clans and kins of creatures, differing from us and our kin, yet occasionally coming into contact with us, and influencing us not greatly, perhaps, yet strangely and notably” (113). Though the reader knows that the Brownie is actually Gibbie, MacDonald’s evocation of the Brownie casts an air of supernaturalism over this portion of the book, allowing him to remind his readers of the possibility that the world contains more than they can readily perceive. Donal’s reaction is one MacDonald tries to reproduce throughout his audience. Each of these folkloric

⁴⁰Brownies are traditionally spirits who live in houses and help with tasks around the house in exchange for gifts of food. They generally stay out of sight, and seem to be easily offended by being given too much (Westwood and Kingshill 80-81). However, some Brownies defy the stereotypes, such as that appearing in James Hogg’s “The Brownie of Black Haggs,” who appears from nowhere, presumably to punish the Lady of Wheelhope, who has allegedly committed two murders and is a generally horrible person. The Brownie frustrates all her schemes to get rid of him, and the story ends with her disgraced and dead, and the Brownie nowhere to be found.

references, however passing in nature, adds to the expansiveness of the reality MacDonald presents.

This is true even when used with intentional irony as in *Thomas Wingfold*, where he presents two characters he calls “The Dwarfs.” On the one hand, Joseph and Rachel Polwarth are human beings with hereditary dwarfism. At the same time, MacDonald is tapping into a fairy tale motif; dwarves frequently appear.⁴¹ Moreover, as Richard Sturch argues that they “have a definite traditional character, and [C.S.] Lewis says of such beings . . . that they ‘have their insides on the outside; they are visible souls’ . This is true. You can hardly imagine a gruff Elf or an over-refined Dwarf” (19).⁴² MacDonald would not have been aware of Lewis’s comments, as they were made after his death, but he would have been familiar with the traditional literary depiction of dwarves. With the Polwarths, however, MacDonald completely subverts that tradition. When they first appear, MacDonald allows George Bascombe to say “in a tone of righteous anger” that “Such creatures have no right to existence” (45) and that Rachel “ought to have been strangled the moment she was born—for the sake of humanity. Monsters ought not to live” (46).⁴³ To Bascombe, the Polwarths are sub-human. However, as the book unfolds, it becomes clear

⁴¹ The most recognizable example is probably the Grimms’ “Snow White,” with which MacDonald would have been familiar.

⁴² It is questionable how established this was at the time of MacDonald’s work. In “Snow White,” for example, Maria Tatar (1999) points out that the dwarves’ home is already spotlessly neat and clean, even “dainty,” before Snow White ever arrives on the scene (78). Nonetheless, Henderson and Cowan (2001) confirm that the term did have some long-standing negative connotations (55, 163). This is further confirmed by MacDonald naming his dwarfs “Polwarth,” which is a likely reference to Sir Patrick Hume of Polwarth, as he is described by poet Alexander Montgomerie in his portion of the poetic duel “Flyting of Montgomerie and Polwart” (c. 1583). In this poem, Montgomerie describes Polwarth as half elf/half ape, and the product of all things evil, receiving “birth gifts of monumental repugnance upon the newborn – every possible type of disease or affliction that they could command” (Henderson and Cowan 160-61). In so naming his dwarfs, MacDonald channels and subverts these images.

⁴³ To twenty-first century sensibilities, such sentiments are reprehensible. Though the term itself would not appear until 1883, early ideas of eugenics were beginning to be discussed at the time of *Thomas Wingfold*’s writing (Paul 3). Bascombe’s views represent an extreme, but not unheard of, strain of thought, providing a solid clue as to MacDonald’s views on the subject. Though not a traditional villain, Bascombe is the closest thing *Thomas Wingfold* has to one, even surpassing Leopold, the murderer. Bascombe is a complete materialist, refusing to believe in anything beyond what his senses reveal, disavowing the human soul and any prospect of life after death. Much of the novel focuses on the “battle” between Wingfold’s ideas and Bascombe’s for the soul of Helen Lingard. In the end, Helen chooses Wingfold, soundly dismissing Bascombe and his ideas, and reaffirming MacDonald’s attitudes towards these questions. For more about Victorian attitudes towards eugenics, see Diane Paul (1995), *Controlling Human Heredity*.

that the Polwarths are the spiritual center of the novel. Joseph Polwarth is this book's version of the spiritual adviser who appears in nearly all of MacDonald's non-fantasies.⁴⁴ He guides Wingfold on his spiritual journey, and embodies the religious ideals associated with MacDonald. By associating these ideals with characters belonging to a traditional folkloric niche, MacDonald both expands his novel's presentation of reality and subverts his readers' expectations, forcing them to broaden their understanding.

Demonic Activity

Throughout his works, MacDonald also delves into other areas of supernatural manifestation, drawing specifically on orthodox Christian beliefs about demonic activity. As a Christian pastor, MacDonald's belief that reality contains more than we can readily see would have included the idea that there are evil spirits at work in the world, as well as angelic forces operating in opposition to those forces ("The Casting Out of Devils" 351). This belief shows throughout his works. In the fantasies, the most obvious example comes from *Lilith*, which takes as its starting point the legend that Lilith was Adam's first wife, who rebelled and was turned into a demon as punishment (Jeffrey 454-55).

However, this type of supernatural activity is more prevalent in the non-fantasies, where he frequently uses it to underscore his theological points. The most notable example is in *David Elginbrod*. While the "ghost" of Lady Euphrasia turns out to be not real, this book includes some genuine supernatural events, centered around the character of Herr von Funkelstein. Funkelstein convinces the residents of Arnstead to participate in a séance, complete with a makeshift planchette⁴⁵ (216-20). At first, it appears to be nonsense because

⁴⁴ For example, David Elginbrod, Old Rogers (*Annals of a Quiet Neighbourhood*), Alexander Graham (*Malcolm; The Marquis of Lossie*), Janet Grant (*Sir Gibbie*), Andrew Comin (*Donal Grant*), and MacLear (*Salted with Fire*), among others. This will be more developed in Chapter Four.

⁴⁵ A planchette is "A small board supported on castors, typically heart-shaped and fitted with a writing implement held vertically, which, when one or more people rest their fingers on the board, is said to trace out messages without conscious human direction" (OED Online). These were quite commonly used in Spiritualism (Oppenheim 77). In *David Elginbrod*, the planchette consists of a pencil drilled into the bottom of a plate.

when Mr. Arnold attempts to use it, nothing happens. Even when Funkelstein joins in, the results are indecipherable. When Hugh tries it, however, the planchette clearly writes out the name “David Elginbrod,” a man Hugh had known in Scotland before coming to Arnstead. Nor can it be dismissed as Hugh’s imagination; Euphra comments on the name as well. A few moments later, as the séance continues, Hugh sees something that he cannot explain: “a pale, beautiful face, – a face only. It was the face of Margaret Elginbrod; not however such as he had used to see it—but glorified” (220). At that moment, the plate stops moving and does not continue.

MacDonald has been criticized for almost immediately explaining the appearance of Margaret at that crucial moment. Wolff describes *David Elginbrod* as having “an elaborate plot whose clumsy mysteries the author himself robs of their effect by flat-footedly explaining them away at once” (182). Indeed, within a few pages, MacDonald explains that Margaret is actually present in the house as the lady’s maid of a guest of the Arnolds (225-26). It is true that spiritualism was very popular⁴⁶ at the time when this book was written, and if the sole reason to include this scene were to add suspense to the novel, then Wolff might be correct to suggest that it might have been better to keep the mystery for longer, but MacDonald uses this scene to make a point about the spiritual forces present. Raeper has mistakenly claimed that the immediate explanation of Margaret’s actual physical presence makes the “supernatural phenomena [into] mere trickery” (*George MacDonald* 198), but this is not the case. The “supernatural phenomena” were real. The name “David Elginbrod” was actually written on the paper; it was not trickery. Margaret’s actual, physical presence in the room causes it to stop, immediately. The powers at work in the séance cannot continue in her presence because Margaret is the novel’s embodiment of

⁴⁶ The beginnings of the Spiritualism movement are generally traced to March 31, 1848, in Arcadia, New York, where the Fox family began experiencing strange rapping noises in their home (Colin Wilson 329). The movement quickly spread across the United States before arriving in the United Kingdom with the arrival of some American mediums in 1852. By the time of *David Elginbrod*, Spiritualism was extremely popular across Britain (McCabe 104; Barrow 10).

goodness, a walking representation of the power of God. That they cannot continue in the presence of such a person shows not only that the spirits at work are evil, but that they are less powerful than God. MacDonald further emphasizes this by having two more similar scenes in which Margaret's entry into or proximity to the room causes the supernatural manifestations to cease immediately (228-29, 247). MacDonald does not include these occurrences merely because they are exciting. He uses them to make a specific point about the world his readers inhabit. There are spirits at work. They are real, but they are less powerful than the God to whom MacDonald wishes to turn his readers.

Demonic activity occurs in MacDonald's other fiction as well. *Annals of a Quiet Neighbourhood* (1867), which narrates the experiences of a young clergyman in his first parish, contains several references. The novel's villain is described as "possessed" (314). The novel also contains three consecutive chapters named "The Devil in Thomas Weir," "The Devil in Catherine Weir," and "The Devil in the Vicar" (388-424). Each chapter focuses on an encounter between Walton (the vicar) and either Thomas or Catherine Weir, a father and daughter who are estranged because she bore an illegitimate child. In each case, tempers are lost; MacDonald's choice of chapter titles suggests that the altercations are, at least in part, the result of the characters' failure to seek after God in these situations, suggesting demonic influence, if not actual possession. Significantly, the chapter in which Catherine and her father are reconciled is entitled "Satan Cast Out" (447-63), suggesting the idea of exorcism. In *Guild Court* (1868), Mattie Kitely, a young child, is perpetually tormented by something she calls "Syne."⁴⁷ MacDonald makes it clear that Syne is a demonic force. He is repeatedly associated with biblical stories involving demon possession (113-14, 178-79), and he is the source of much of Mattie's suffering. As Mattie draws closer to "Somebody" (her name for Christ), Syne grows less powerful and

⁴⁷ The significance of MacDonald's choice of this particular Scots word will be discussed in Chapter Four.

eventually goes away. The presence of these incidents throughout MacDonald's work shows his continued interest in making his readers aware of the existence of these forces, to put them on their guard against them, and to point their way to the God who can defeat them. Across the oeuvre, supernatural occurrences are not merely devices to add suspense, nor are they simply poor artistic choices on MacDonald's part. They are an integral part of MacDonald's overall literary vision to break his readers out of commonplace modes of thinking and broaden their understandings of true reality and the God waiting for them at the heart of it.

Secrets

Another frequent plot device in MacDonald's fiction is the presence and ultimate revelation of secrets, things that have been hidden and must be revealed. In *The Flight of the Shadow* (1891), MacDonald describes a secret as "mole that burrows" (28). The heroine, Belorba Whichcote, is instructed by her uncle: "Never, my little one, hide anything from those that love you. Never let anything that makes itself a nest in your heart, grow into a secret, for then at once it will begin to eat a hole in it" (27). The novel proceeds to dramatize this as Belorba, who is quite young at the beginning, peeks into her uncle's cabinet drawers without permission (31-33). She is so filled with horror at what she has done that she sits in the darkness until her uncle returns and she can confess her secret and be rid of it (33-41). Belorba comes to understand that her uncle's deep hatred of secrets is because he has one of his own, and it causes him years of anguish. It turns out that he believes he was responsible for the death of his twin brother (318). Eventually, this secret threatens to destroy the happiness of his niece, when her fiancé's mother threatens to reveal his secret (she was present when it happened) because she objects to the marriage. The happy ending comes about only once the truth has been fully revealed, further demonstrating MacDonald's belief that secrets and hidden things are dangerous and must be

revealed for growth and progress to take place.

This idea takes multiple forms throughout his oeuvre, manifesting in different types of secrets. One of the most frequent is the existence of secret rooms or passages. In *The Princess and the Goblin*, the Great-Great-Grandmother's room is hidden. It is only revealed when the Great-Great-Grandmother wants it to be found. When Irene seeks it on her own, she cannot find it (40). Many of the main houses in the non-fantasies are equipped with hidden rooms and passages as well. In *David Elginbrod*, Lady Euphrasia's bedroom features a secret passage connecting it to another part of the house, which allows for discreet entrance to and escape from the "haunted" chamber (224-25). The house in *Annals of a Quiet Neighbourhood* sits on the edge of a hill, at the bottom of which is a pool. A secret stair runs from the house to beneath the surface of the pool. Though ostensibly built as a defense against siege (88), the tunnel and the pool belong to a dark chapter in the house's past, involving seduction and the attempted murder of an unwanted child (106-24). A hidden passage in *Malcolm* has a similar history (397, 410). The secret passage in *Castle Warlock* holds the key to the Warlock family fortune and, consequently, the family future (333-45). The central plot of *Donal Grant* revolves around the discovery of the hidden chapel and the secrets it contains (267-70). In each case, the existence of the secret passage or room adds an air of mystery and suspense to the novel's plot, while demonstrating, again, that the visible is only part of what is really there.

MacDonald also presents a number of characters who have true identities that are unknown or hidden for a time. In *The Princess and Curdie*, the Great-Great-Grandmother frequently appears in different forms. At various points, she appears as a frail old woman (36), a strong old woman (45), a giant emerald (65), a young princess (67), and a maid (303). Curdie's task is to see through her various external appearances to the true identity beneath the surface. In *Lilith*, Mr. Raven and his wife are eventually revealed to be Adam

and Eve (212), and Lilith is revealed to have been Adam's first wife (210). In the non-fantasies, secret identities generally take the form of hidden or unknown parentage.

Gibbie's true identity as Sir Gilbert Galbraith is known to the readers and Gibbie from early in *Sir Gibbie* (24), but it remains hidden from the rest of the characters for quite some time. In *Malcolm*, the central character is known throughout the town as the adopted grandson of Duncan MacPhail. As the novel progresses, the reader learns that Duncan found Malcolm in a cave (178), and his parentage becomes the subject of gossip and speculation around town (269-70). Eventually, he is revealed to be the legitimate son of the Marquis of Lossie (395-96). The plot of *The Marquis of Lossie* (1877) focuses on Malcolm's attempt to keep his parentage a secret until the time is right to reveal it.

The third major type of secret in MacDonald's fiction involves secret actions. It is this treatment of secrets that ties most closely in with MacDonald's purposes. MacDonald's books are full of secret acts, things that people try to keep hidden. In some cases, the reader is privy to these secrets from the moment they occur, and the action revolves around the effect of those secrets on the lives of the offenders and the ultimate bringing of those secrets to light. This is the case with Tom's theft in *Guild Court* (228), as well as Blatherwick's seduction of Isy in *Salted with Fire* (1897) (30-31). For both of these men, the knowledge of their action eats away at them until they confess and make amends. Occasionally, the reader never does learn the full story. Both Euphra Cameron in *David Elginbrod* (300) and Sepia Yolland in *Mary Marston* (89) have pasts that are merely hinted at, full of things they would prefer to keep hidden. In most cases, however, the reader learns of these experiences along with the other characters. As Walton learns the history of the Oldcastle family in *Annals of a Quiet Neighbourhood*, the reader learns it with him (106-24; 303-25). In *Malcolm*, the reader learns of the Marquis's past actions at the same time that the Marquis himself learns of their consequences (390-97). In *Castle Warlock*, Lord Mergwain's

murderous past is revealed to the reader as Cosmo and his family piece it together (97-98).

In *Donal Grant*, the presence of secrets drives the plot, as the characters search into the castle legend of the hidden room, uncovering other secrets along the way. As they search for and eventually find the hidden chapel with its centuries-old tale of torture and murder, they uncover secrets of more vital import to the characters themselves. The most revealing of these secrets are those surrounding the novel's villain, Lord Morven. Along with the chapel, Donal's investigations uncover another hidden room, with a desk inside (306). Inside the desk are papers left by the woman everyone believed was Morven's wife, although the papers confirm that they were never married, a fact revealed by Morven in a fit of anger (238-40). For Donal, this discovery prompts a reflection on the nature of God: "thy secret places are secret from excess of light; in thee is no darkness at all; thou hast no terrible crypts and built-up places" (307). For Morven, it prompts something very different. Despite using the threat of revelation to force his son to do what he wishes, Morven never has any actual intention of revealing this information to the public (374). Later, when Morven is dying, his biggest regret is the way he treated the mother of his children, particularly forcing her to live with that secret. When he learns that she herself left a record of it, bringing the secret out into the open (though it took a few years), it opens a floodgate of his own confession (374-77), allowing him to pray (377) and find peace (392). As with his other plot elements, MacDonald uses these secrets to simultaneously engage his readers' imaginations and to impress upon them the importance of uncovering what is hidden, of seeing what is not readily seen. The refusal to acknowledge what exists beyond the readily apparent, whether it is something supernatural or something secret, acts as a block to a fully realized relationship with God the creator. Through his use of secrets, MacDonald encourages his readers to examine their own lives, and see the consequences of keeping things secret that should be revealed. He also, once again, reminds his readers not to take

the surface of a thing for the actual truth of the thing, urging them to look deeper, and see the hidden truths at the heart.

Endings

Finally, a closer look needs to be taken at the endings of MacDonald's novels. He has been accused of overusing the happy ending. Reis claims that "The plotting of MacDonald's novels has one characteristic common to all of them: the conventional happy ending" (*George MacDonald* 55). He further writes that MacDonald's readers "might be dreadfully sure that the hero's adherence to the demands of Honor will leave him hopelessly foiled, no matter what improbabilities may be required to save him, and that, if he is virtuous enough, he will turn out to be the son of an earl" (61). These "inevitable happy endings" are, for Reis, one of MacDonald's chief literary sins (61). Raeper has argued that MacDonald's endings "become credible only if they are read as fairy tales" (*George MacDonald* 209). These comments raise some interesting issues. First, what is this "conventional happy ending" of which Reis speaks? Presumably, he refers to an ending in which the protagonist(s) live happily ever after. That is certainly implied by Raeper's comparison to fairy tale endings. For Victorian readers, the "conventional happy ending" would likely have included a wedding between the hero and heroine, and the promise of a blissful life ahead (Flint 25). For much of the period, it also certainly would have involved a certain amount of moral reinforcement through the reward of virtue. Flint (2001) points out "how frequently novelists employed the formula of a woman placed in adverse social or emotional conditions, finally having her qualities, her forbearance, her attractiveness rewarded by marriage to a suitably sensitive yet manly husband" (27) and that "[t]his taste for moral certitude can be traced across much of Victorian fiction" (30). MacDonald was not that different from his contemporaries in this respect.

Furthermore, both critics' statements imply a uniformity of ending type throughout

MacDonald's works. This simply is not true, and it oversimplifies the much more complex variety actually present in MacDonald's works. For one thing, Raeper's assertion that MacDonald's non-fantasies have fairy tale endings becomes deeply problematic when one stops to examine the actual endings of MacDonald's fairy tales. While it is true that many of them follow the "and they lived happily ever after" formula, it is not true that they all do. Among the short tales, "Cross Purposes" ends with Alice and Richard leaving Fairy Land to return to the real world and going their separate ways because of their different economic and social backgrounds (170). Waller Hastings (1992) suggests that "The absence of even a symbolic reward at the end of 'Cross Purposes' seems to limit the tale's effectiveness" (84). Roderick McGillis points out that the children in "The Giant's Heart," while they defeat the giant, "do not return home. No family reunion occurs" ("Introduction" 8). The ending of *The Princess and Curdie* is particularly troublesome. It ends with Irene and Curdie marrying; however, they do not have children, and after a few generations, the entire city of Gwyntystorm collapses into dust and oblivion (320). This is not a "conventional happy ending." *At the Back of the North Wind* ends with the death of the protagonist (377-78). At the end of *The Wise Woman*, one of the girls has shown improvement, but the other has grown decidedly worse (157-58). Likewise, the ending of *Lilith* is very ambiguous, with Vane essentially left waiting for death to reunite him with his beloved Lona (357-59). Even MacDonald's fairy tales do not uniformly have fairy-tale endings.

Nor do his non-fantasies consistently have such endings. Yes, a number of MacDonald's novels do follow the boy-gets-girl-and-lives-happily-ever-after formula. *David Elginbrod*, *Alec Forbes of Howglen*, *Guild Court*, *Annals of a Quiet Neighborhood*, *Gutta Percha Willie*, *The Marquis of Lossie*, *Sir Gibbie*, *Mary Marston*, *Castle Warlock*, and *Salted with Fire* all follow this pattern. However, when one considers that the vast majority of mainstream Victorian fiction also follows this pattern, it cannot be used to

justify the dismissal of MacDonald's fiction—especially considering that this represents only a portion of MacDonald's output. At least one critic, Timothy Bleeker (1990) has acknowledged that MacDonald's endings are actually much more varied than critics have allowed (136), but even he postulates that "Given MacDonald's cosmic optimism, and the inability of the non-fantasy novel to pursue a character's fortunes beyond the grave, the happy ending most faithfully expresses his conception of reality: a reality in which not 'reward' but acceptance, understanding, and joy eventually await those who strive to follow the divine will" (135). This may be accurate to a point, but even Bleeker fails to account for the complexity of MacDonald's complete oeuvre.

In several of MacDonald's non-fantasies, the endings do not fall into the category of "conventional happy ending." Robert Falconer never marries; his "happy ending" comes in the form of a reconciliation with his father. However, the "happiness" of the ending is tempered by the sentence "The great iron steamer went down in the middle of the Atlantic, and I have not yet seen my friend again" (566). Robert and his father presumably drowned when their ship sank. Though Gibbie and Ginevra marry at the end of *Sir Gibbie*, Gibbie's best friend Donal Grant ends up with a broken heart (387). His own book, *Donal Grant*, sees him find love with Arctura. They marry, but Arctura dies almost immediately after the ceremony (384-85). *Malcolm* ends with Malcolm finding out about his parentage, but it cannot be considered a fully happy ending because his true identity is still hidden from the world (435-38). *St. George and St. Michael* ends with the reunion of the hero and heroine, but it is a very melancholy reunion, taking place in the burned-out skeleton of the castle Dorothy had grown to love (425). Though those two characters find personal happiness, the novel ends with an unoptimistic and somewhat bitter look forward. The final chapter opens "And now I must bury my dead out of sight" (430), focusing the ending not on the happy ending of the characters, but on the bleak future facing England: "not merely the

mechanical, but the unpoetic and commonplace, yes, vulgar era of our island's history . . . wasting, defiling, scarring, obliterating, turning beauty into ashes, and worse!" (430).

Again, this is not an unequivocally happy ending.

Furthermore, some of MacDonald's critics have displayed an alarming tendency to assume an ending that MacDonald does not give. Reis says that "in *The Vicar's Daughter* much of the tension at the end of the story concerns whether or not [a] charity-working girl should marry and give up 'her poor.' Eventually, she does" (*George MacDonald* 68). Actually, she does not. It is a possibility, but the novel ends without a definite choice being made on the part of Marion Clare. Furthermore, the novel's narrator, Wynn timer, expresses doubt that a marriage will happen:

I believe Lady Bernard intends to give her a hint that a married couple would, in her opinion, be far more useful in such a position than a single woman. But although I rejoice in the prospect of greater happiness for two dear friends, I must in honesty say that I doubt this. (387)

Wynn timer wants them to get married, but she does not actually think it will happen. Even if Wynn timer's doubts can be interpreted as referring to the relative usefulness of a married couple and a single woman, that is enough to cast doubt on the assumption that Marion will get married. She has all along put her work ahead of the idea of marriage. If marriage will make her less effective, she will not marry. The possibility of a marriage still exists at the end of the novel, but it is far from a settled conclusion. Likewise, at least one critic has speculated that Hester Raymount, the heroine of *Weighed and Wanting* (1882), "is close to marrying Dr Christopher" (Raeper, *George MacDonald* 207). Again, this is presumptuous. The novel does not entirely rule out the possibility that they marry, but it does not say that it happens. The novel gives no clear indication whatsoever of a romantic relationship between these two characters. It does not disavow such a relationship, but given

MacDonald's tendency to tie up loose ends, if he intended these characters to marry, it seems likely he would have given a more direct hint of it. As it is, he just says that "Hester laboured, and Christopher laboured" (625). Like Marion, both characters put their work ahead of marriage, and there is no clear indication that they are ever more than friends. Because critics are so quick to assume that MacDonald intended a "conventional happy ending," they miss the complexity actually present in MacDonald's novels.⁴⁸

Bleeker is ultimately correct in applying MacDonald's endings to his views of reality, but he does not take those views far enough. It is likely that MacDonald would have seen the happy ending as a means of representing eternal happiness in temporal form, but the existence of these other types of endings indicates that MacDonald was actually doing more than that. Part of MacDonald's purpose was to educate his readers' imaginations to see the larger reality at work in the world, beyond what is readily apparent. By presenting endings that do not conform to the "conventional happy ending," to present a partial image of eternal happiness, MacDonald demonstrates what he saw as actual reality. Robert's death is not a cause for grief, but of celebration because his death has merely moved him from this world to the next. Donal mourns Arctura, but he never feels truly separated from her. He knows that they will be together eternally. The ending of *St. George and St. Michael* begs his readers to open themselves up to a world that is not "unpoetic and commonplace." Marion and Hester put their involvement with the eternal souls of the poor ahead of their own temporal happiness. As with the other plot elements examined, MacDonald's endings play a fundamental role in expressing his ultimate message.

Conclusion

MacDonald's plots have never been considered one of his strong points. To the majority of his critics, they are too repetitive, too episodic, and too unrealistic to be

⁴⁸ For more about the significance of the endings of these two novels, see Stelle, "Breaking the Mold."

considered good literature. On the surface, many of the criticisms are true. MacDonald's novels do feature repeating motifs. They are, at times, episodic. He frequently does overstep the bounds of reality. Where critics have gone wrong is in the interpretation and evaluation of these elements. Too often, the critics approach MacDonald's plots with their own pre-conceived expectations about what they should find instead of actually looking at what is there. They talk about what MacDonald's intentions should have been, rather than looking at what his intentions were. Consequently, they miss the connections between his literary choices and the message he sought to convey. MacDonald wanted to educate his readers, to teach them to use their imaginations to draw closer to their Creator. To do this, he sought to engage their imaginations, and he used exciting episodes such as crime, natural disasters, supernatural manifestations, and secretive intrigues to do it. At the same time, however, he weaves these exciting episodes together with an expanded vision of reality, a vision which encompasses much more than commonplace, everyday things. In doing so, he hoped to open his readers' minds and imaginations to that larger reality. His plot choices were not incidental. They were not merely vehicles to explore his theological ideas. They were a fundamental part of achieving his ultimate literary purposes.

Chapter Four

MacDonald and Characterization

Introduction

The three primary criticisms of MacDonald's non-fantasies have consistently been that the plots are unrealistic, the characters are stereotypical, and the style is overly preachy. The previous chapter attempted to demonstrate that MacDonald's use of plot is both much more complex than he has been given credit for and entirely consistent with his own views regarding the purpose of literature. While his plots might seem unrealistic, they actually demonstrate MacDonald's view of a larger reality, and he uses those plot elements to educate his readers' imaginations to perceive and appreciate that larger reality. The situation with his characters is quite similar. While character types do recur throughout MacDonald's oeuvre, they are not as uniform as many of his critics attempt to claim. Nor are they a sign that MacDonald was unskilled as a novelist. They are an integral component of MacDonald's overall purpose to train the imaginations of his readers. Whereas MacDonald used plot elements to demonstrate the existence of a larger reality, he uses his characters to establish the importance of an awareness of and engagement with that larger reality in the lives of individuals.

MacDonald's Characters, According to his Critics

Just as MacDonald's plots have been criticized for their lack of originality, his characterization has been widely disparaged by his critics. Interestingly, however, while the vast majority of MacDonald's critics seem to agree that something is lacking in MacDonald's characterization, they cannot seem to agree on what that something is. His harshest critic is Reis (1972), who argues that "MacDonald never wrote a novel in which he entirely avoided the pitfalls of glib or preposterous characterization" (*George MacDonald* 64). He goes on to claim:

Any veteran novel-reader, especially if he has read much popular Victorian fiction, will groan upon meeting the usual MacDonald Hero Fictional characters should, after all, be approximately *people*, and people are too complex to be neatly pinned to the specimen-board with a word or even a phrase. The MacDonald Hero is simple—simply a bore. (65, 66)

Furthermore, Reis classifies MacDonald's heroines as largely "indistinguishable from each other and from the supposedly typical Victorian young lady of sensitivity and delicacy" (67). His villains "are never brought to life" (71). He concludes that MacDonald's characters "are all, in fact, the stereotypes of sentimental literature. The term *stereotype*, to which I shall refer again, is after all a book reviewer's standby, designating by definition unoriginality and feebleness of imagination" (67). For Reis, who claimed that the non-fantasies belong in "permanent and deserved oblivion" (28), MacDonald's characterization does nothing to change that conclusion.

But Reis contradicts himself. After criticizing MacDonald's characterization as described, he goes on to admit that "MacDonald frequently presents striking and convincing people" (67). Still, he argues, even many of these fail to "make a character live in the memory as if he were somebody the reader has met and cannot forget" (67-68). Reis does point out a few seemingly more successful characters, but he nearly always finds a way to ultimately dismiss any success MacDonald might have had. MacDonald's ability to draw interesting characters is damaged by the "fact" that many of the best are based on people he actually knew. They are interesting because they actually are real (68-69). If they are not based on particular individuals, they are based on "types" MacDonald encountered either in life or in literature. Reis dismisses MacDonald's depiction of Duncan MacPhail in *Malcolm* (1875) because the character's speech closely resembles that of a character in Scott's *Rob Roy* (70). Finally, he argues that MacDonald's most memorable character, Barbara

Catanach in *Malcolm* and *The Marquis of Lossie* (1877) is “ideally suited to fantasy but disastrously misplaced in the novel” (71). Despite Reis’s attempts to explain the exceptions away, clearly, *not* all of MacDonald’s characters are actually stereotypes; Reis himself gives examples to the contrary.

Furthermore, Reis himself acknowledges that MacDonald’s characterization is not that different in the fantasies from what it is in the non-fantasies. He asks, “regarding MacDonald’s characterization, how can one defend the fact that in his fantasies the characters fall inevitably into types—princes and princesses, villains and heroines, paragons and victims—while complaining about such typing in the realistic works?” (105). Ultimately, as he did when criticizing MacDonald’s plots, Reis can only answer this by falling back on the critical double standard, claiming that what is bad in non-fantasy is perfectly acceptable, even expected, in fantasy. He writes:

MacDonald was, when he perpetrated his stereotyped and banal characterizations, trying to write conventional realistic novels, to observe the laws of this world as they really are, to place his characters in a realistic social context, and to observe what Prescott calls the conventions of sequential time and oriented space In the fantasy, however, the same tendency produces what Frye calls ‘archetypes.’ An archetypal character is one who appears throughout the history of imaginative literature; and, unlike the stereotype of bad realistic literature, he strikes the reader in a powerful and evocative way. (115-16)

This way of thinking is flawed in many ways. First of all, as already demonstrated, the lines between fantasy and realism are not as fixed as Reis suggests. They were even less rigidly fixed during the Victorian period, when the various genres of realism, romance, sensationalism, Gothicism, were still being defined, and when fantasy was first emerging as

a separate genre. Second, Reis is wrong to assume that MacDonald ever had any intention of “trying to write conventional realistic novels.”⁴⁹ His entire oeuvre belies this conclusion, as MacDonald’s very interpretation of “reality” fails to conform to that of so-called “conventional realistic novels.”

Finally, Reis is wrong to assume that archetypes are the sole property of fantasy literature. Archetypal characters appear across the literary spectrum and do not become stereotypes just because they appear in a more realistic setting. This holds true for MacDonald as well, and several of his critics have noted the presence of assorted archetypes across MacDonald’s oeuvre. Hein (1982) observes that “Archetypal patterns and images form a firm substructure in both MacDonald’s fantasies and his novels” (*Harmony Within* 116). Cusick (1990) traces several archetypes across MacDonald’s body of work (56-86). Raeper (1987) suggests that “MacDonald’s characters have often been chastised as cardboard figures of melodrama or creatures of fairy tale. To see them as archetypal psychic fragments who yield to a Jungian analysis is perhaps a more helpful way of looking at them” (“‘Missing’ Year” 10). Some of MacDonald’s typical characters are stereotypes; however, they are not stereotypes simply because they appear in the non-fantasies. The presence of archetypes transcends genre lines.

Fortunately, many of MacDonald’s other critics give MacDonald some credit. Many of these critics agree with the overall assessment that his characterization is less than good, but they keep trying to point out exceptions. MacDonald’s son Ronald (1911) claims that “Well as I know his novels, and various as I find their merit, I can think of none without one character at least to hold attention in reading, and to remain as a kind of friend that would be talked with, if met, upon a known basis of previous intimacy” (63-64). Lewis (1946) claimed that MacDonald’s “‘good’ characters are always the best and most

⁴⁹ See Chapter 2 for a more thorough discussion of this.

convincing. His saints live; his villains are stagey” (xxxii-xxxiii). Hein echoes this idea (*Harmony Within* 124-25), as does Bleeker (1990) (148). Wolff (1961) notes that “Euphrasia Cameron of *David Elginbrod*, a good deal older and far more experienced than the innocent Hugh Sutherland, [is] a real woman and not a type or an exaggeration, dark and flirtatious” (197-98). Though not actually a villain, Euphrasia is certainly not a saint, yet she is “real.” In fact, Wolff contends that “MacDonald . . . often succeeds in creating a living woman character,” (239). Manlove (1979) singles out “the evocation of Aberdeenshire characters” which “shows a power of vivid portrayal the equal of which is only to be found in the finest of Scottish novels” (“Scottish Novels” 86). Similarly, Raeper notes that “MacDonald’s small communities are nevertheless peopled with memorable characters The characters are all drawn with humour and conviction” (*George MacDonald* 190). Interestingly, these assorted exceptions span MacDonald’s oeuvre, suggesting that they are not, perhaps, as exceptional as the critics claim.

Equally interesting is the way MacDonald’s critics qualify their praise of his characterization. After praising MacDonald’s “Aberdeenshire characters,” Manlove goes on to say that “[e]ven their failures testify to the powers of the thought and feeling which were at variance in them” (“Scottish Novels” 86). This sounds like praise, but despite the “powers of thought and feeling,” these works remain failures in Manlove’s eyes. Wolff also claims that MacDonald’s novels “fail” (265). Hein writes that “Despite [the] very great dramatic burden resting upon them, many of these characters are remarkably less stereotyped and mechanical than their function, in the hands of most novelists, would force them to be” (*Harmony Within* 124). This is faint praise at best. Raeper notes that “MacDonald has been criticized for setting cardboard cut-outs of saints and villains on his stage – the Margaret Elginbrods and Lord Rothies of unconvincing melodrama – but seen as characters from a fairy tale, or as fragments of the human psyche, they assume an interest

which otherwise the reader would overlook” (*George MacDonald* 209). He does not deny the “cardboard cut-out” nature of these characters; their primary value is in their relationship to fairy tale and psychology.

Throughout MacDonald studies, the general assumption still remains that MacDonald’s non-fantasies were an attempt to produce a narrowly-defined “realistic” portrait of the world and people around him and that he failed to accurately produce that portrait. However, if one approaches MacDonald’s characterization, not with the expectation of “realism,” but to see what MacDonald actually does with his characters, a different picture emerges. MacDonald wanted his books to educate his readers’ imaginations. He viewed his society as being content to simply wallow in the mundane and commonplace around them. He strove to remind them that a larger reality exists, to teach them to open their minds and imaginations to that reality, and to lead them to the Creator at the center of everything. His characters are an important part of how he pursues that goal. Whereas with plot he challenged his readers to consider the possibility that reality contains more than can always be easily explained, with his characters, he examines and demonstrates the importance an awareness of that reality has in the lives of individuals. Throughout his oeuvre, MacDonald presents characters who demonstrate various levels of openness, and he explores the impact of this on those characters’ lives.

Characters on the Precipice

MacDonald’s essay “A Sketch of Individual Development” (1880)⁵⁰ traces the growth and development of a hypothetical individual. He traces him through earliest childhood and his discovery of his own existence and the world around him. He begins to look about, to wonder what else is out there. He discovers poetry. Then he finds science, which displaces poetry for a time, until he falls in love. Time passes. He settles into the

⁵⁰ See Chapter One for more about this.

daily routine of adult life and is reasonably happy for a time. Gradually, however, the truth of his own mortality sneaks up on him, and he begins to suspect that “all the motion, all the seeming dance, is but a rush for death, a panic flight into the moveless silence” (56-57), and his despair at the thought that this life may be all there is threatens to engulf him:

Life without the higher glory of the unspeakable, the atmosphere of a God, is not life, is not worth living. He would rather cease to be, than walk the dull level of the commonplace—than live the unideal of men in whose company he can take no pleasure—men who are as of a lower race, whom he fain would lift, who will not rise, but for whom as for himself he would cherish the hope they do their best to kill. (58)

For a time, his struggles continue. Until he begins to actively seek out and pursue the God at the center of everything, the God whose existence gives everything else meaning, he cannot find peace.

MacDonald's fiction dramatizes this journey frequently, in different forms and situations. Few of his protagonists arrive on the page as fully developed individuals living in harmony with the larger reality. Many of them walk along a precipice, and their lives could go either way—into dullness, commonplaceness, and despair or into a fully realized, open existence. Significantly, the protagonists of both *Phantastes* (1858) and *Lilith* (1896) are young men on the cusp of entering responsible adulthood. *Phantastes*'s Anodos has just turned twenty-one and been given the keys to his father's desk and access to his private papers (13). *Lilith*'s Vane is “taking a brief holiday from work before assuming definitely the management of the estate” (7). As Roderick McGillis (1990) notes, “both are alone in the world; both have just graduated from Oxford; both have inherited a large estate; and neither has had to work for his daily bread. Both are Philistines: money and social position are criteria of social respectability” (“*Phantastes* and *Lilith*” 32). In short, both are in

danger of getting swallowed up by commonplace matters before they set off on their fairyland adventures, from which they both return better prepared to balance the demands of this world with the reality of the other.

The Princess and Curdie (1882) opens with Curdie in a similarly dangerous place. In *The Princess and the Goblin* (1872), Curdie cannot see the Great-Great-Grandmother when little Irene takes him to her (222-28), but by the end of the book, though he has still not seen, he believes (283). By the start of the sequel, however, Curdie has begun to question that belief:

But as Curdie grew older, he doubted more and more whether Irene had not been talking of some dream she had taken for reality So he rather shrunk from thinking about it, and the less he thought about it, the less he was inclined to believe it when he did think about it, and therefore, of course, the less inclined to talk about it to his father and mother as Curdie grew, he grew at this time faster in body than in mind—with the usual consequence, that he was getting rather stupid—one of the chief signs of which was that he believed less and less of things he had never seen On his way to and from the mine he took less and less notice of bees and butterflies, moths and dragon-flies, the flowers and the brooks and the clouds. He was gradually changing into a commonplace man. (20-22)

Curdie's downward progress is arrested when he thoughtlessly shoots a pigeon belonging to the Great-Great-Grandmother. His instant remorse and subsequent meeting with the Great-Great-Grandmother lead to his quest, which teaches him, among other things, not to confuse appearance with reality, but to recognize true reality despite how things look.

The non-fantasies likewise frequently feature characters whose development is incomplete and uncertain. Even Walton, in *Annals of a Quiet Neighbourhood* (1867), who

has been described as so good that he is “flat and wooden” (Hein, *Harmony Within* 122), first arrives at his parish depressed and having been disappointed in love (*Annals of a Quiet Neighbourhood* 5) and in danger of thinking his work “drudgery” (6). It is not until he overhears a little boy who wants to “help God paint the sky” that he resolves to view things differently (14-16), having been reminded that his job is to help God’s children see God’s hand in the world around them. In *The Seaboard Parish* (1868), Walton’s daughter Wynnie struggles deeply with an inability to believe, to see what her father sees in the world (151). This is something she continues to struggle with even after she has taken over the narrator’s duties in *The Vicar’s Daughter* (1872). Even towards the end of the novel, Wynnie still struggles to avoid getting swept up in commonplace worries (298-99) and to remember to try and see her life as God sees it. Neither the central character of *Thomas Wingfold* (1876) nor that of *Paul Faber* (1879) are fully developed “MacDonald Heroes,” as Reis defines them. Despite being a clergyman, Wingfold has no idea whether or not he actually even believes in God (28-29), and he is caught plagiarizing someone else’s sermons (63-65). Paul Faber is a convinced atheist at the beginning of his novel (5-6). These novels are about how these characters’ attitudes are transformed, about how they learn to see the world through something other than the lens of the commonplace.

Several of MacDonald’s novels take the form of *Bildungsromane*, tracing the growth and development of his protagonists from childhood into adulthood. As such, these novels feature protagonists whose present development is, by definition, incomplete and uncertain. As they grow, the novels show them facing decisions that will determine their future development. How they will perceive reality, whether as commonplace or full of eternal possibilities, is a key point in their development. *Castle Warlock* (1882) opens with the protagonist, Cosmo, surveying a stream he had loved since childhood because of “its mystery” (5-6) and realizing that he no longer finds it mysterious. He has learned the

science behind it, and the mystery has vanished. His reaction is sadness; he mourns the loss of the mystery. Cosmo has reached a point in his life where he “had supposed nothing was to be accepted that was neither scientifically provable nor told us in the Bible,” but his natural leanings are to the “marvellous” (47). He wants to believe, but he has begun to find it difficult, until his father explains to him that “the dread of superstition might amount to superstition, and become the most dangerous superstition of all” (47). With this conversation, Cosmo begins to realize that “we live in a universe of marvels of which we *know* only the outsides, and that we render any news of these marvels incredible by taking the outsides for all, forgetting that the roots of the seen remain unseen” (47). As Cosmo grows, this realization that reality is more than can be seen remains a part of him. As MacDonald explains, “his imagination could seldom or never find scope enough in this world by itself; to him the end of things never came” (237). For Cosmo, reality is limitless, and exploring this way of seeing the world is an integral part of preparing to take his place in it.

It is not merely a question of being open to the marvelous and mysterious in life, however. At the beginning of *David Elginbrod* (1863), Hugh Sutherland loans Margaret Elginbrod a volume of Coleridge’s poetry. He later discusses “Rime of the Ancient Mariner” with Margaret and David. David says that he has one question he has not been able to answer about the poem: “what for a’ thae sailor-men fell doon deid, an’ the cheild ‘at shot the bonnie burdie, an’ did a’ the mischief, cam’ to little hurt i’ the end—comparateevely?” (17). Later, Hugh walks home:

pondering a little over the fact that a laboring man had discovered a difficulty, perhaps a fault, in one of his favorite poems, which had never suggested itself to him. He soon satisfied himself, however, by coming to the conclusion that the poet had not cared about the matter at all, having had

no further intention in the poem than Hugh himself had found in it, namely witchery and loveliness. (20)

Hugh may admire the marvelous elements of Coleridge's poem, but his attitude is both self-centered and dismissive, assuming that there is nothing in a work of literature besides what he can see there. He rejects any reading that does not mesh with his own views, consequently rejecting the idea that there may be truth he cannot see. He is interested in the "witchery and loveliness" for their own sake, not because they lead to any deeper understanding of truth and reality. This same interest in "witchery and loveliness" opens Hugh up to the attempts of Euphra Cameron to "fascinate" him (140). She is mysterious and lovely, and Hugh is drawn to her to the detriment of his work, his reputation, and his self-image. It is not until Hugh experiences heartbreak and disillusionment that he begins to seek after the truth, which ultimately leads him back to the truths embodied by David Elginbrod.

Being open to mystery and wonder points some of MacDonald's characters in the right direction, but alone, that openness is not enough. It must ultimately lead one to the central heart of reality, to a relationship with God. In *Alec Forbes of Howglen* (1865), MacDonald writes of Alec that "although several years younger than Alec, Annie had much more character and personality than he. Alec had not yet begun to look realities in the face" (140). His growth in this direction begins when he falls in love for the first time and begins to read Byron, which opens to him "the existence of a world of feeling, if not of thought" (208). However, this is only a first step, and MacDonald clearly explains its danger:

The Byron-fever . . . has its origin, perhaps, in the fact that the poet makes no demand either on the intellect or the conscience, but confines himself to friendly intercourse with those passions whose birth long precedes that of choice in their objects Hence the chief harm the poems did Alec,

consisted in the rousing of his strongest feelings towards imaginary objects of inferior excellence, with the necessary result of a tendency to measure the worth of the passions themselves by their strength alone, and not by their character—by their degree, and not by their kind. (207-08)

Byron wakes up Alec's imagination and stimulates his emotions, but it points them in the wrong direction. In *Guild Court* (1868), Tom Worboise suffers from a similar Byron obsession and has "therefore little sympathy with human pursuits except they took some abnormal form—such as piracy, atheism, or the like—in the person of one endowed with splendid faculties and gifts in general" (19). Both young men find Byron stimulating and exciting, but it is stimulation and excitement for its own sake; it lacks root in the eternal reality, and in the end, both young men have to experience disgrace and hardship before they begin to see themselves, their actions, and the world in its proper relation through a true understanding of reality. By populating his novels with protagonists who are on journeys towards this understanding, MacDonald dramatizes the importance of such openness.

Characters who Willfully Reject a Right Understanding of Reality

In the end, most of MacDonald's protagonists eventually end up in the right place. However, his novels also demonstrate the dangers and consequences of rejecting a true understanding of reality, one that goes beyond the mere facts of commonplace existence. As discussed in Chapter One, MacDonald's essay on "The Imagination" addresses a faction who thought that the purpose of education should be to squash the imagination out of students, to fill them with facts, facts, and more facts (1-2). This group, according to MacDonald, viewed the imagination as inherently dangerous, leading to "wild fancies and vague reveries in which young people indulge, to the damage and loss of the real in the world around them" (25-26) and which will eventually produce "vain desires and vain

regrets Is it not better, therefore, to keep to that which is known, and leave the rest?"

(27). To MacDonald, this way of thinking was inherently dangerous:

Kill that whence spring the crude fancies and wild day-dreams of the young, and you will never lead them beyond dull facts—dull because their relations to each other, and the one life that works in them all, must remain undiscovered This outward world is but a passing vision of the persistent true. We shall not live in it always. We are dwellers in a divine universe where no desires are in vain, if only they be large enough. (27)

"Dull facts" were not enough for MacDonald. True reality involves much more than can be understood if one is limited to the facts. A willingness to see that reality contains more is a fundamental element in being a fully-developed person. When a person willfully rejects a reality beyond the commonplace, bad things happen.

This idea is embodied repeatedly in MacDonald's fiction. In the fantasies, *Phantastes* casts those who see the world this way as the wooden men who repeatedly trample a little girl who is trying to collect wings, so that she can make herself a pair and fly away. She requests help from the Knight to whom Anodos becomes a squire. He explains that these wooden men were like "block[s] of wood roughly hewn into the mere outlines of a man; and hardly so for it had but head, body, legs, and arms—the head without a face, and the limbs utterly formless" (299). They can only be stopped by being stood upside down on their heads (300). As a symbolic representation of the anti-imagination faction, who seek to destroy the dreams of the little girl because they, themselves, have only "a very narrow and circumscribed view of existence" (Hein, *Harmony Within* 93), these wooden men hardly appear attractive.

However, the true danger of this type of existence is more fully developed in Anodos and his shadow. At an early point in Anodos's adventures, he expresses "great

pleasure” at watching the fairies frolic (37-43). However, after he acquires his shadow in the home of the ogress (104-07), he notices a change. He explains:

Once, as I passed by a cottage, there came out a lovely fairy child, with two wondrous toys, one in each hand As I looked at him in wonder and delight, round crept from behind me the something dark, and the child stood in my shadow. Straightway he was a commonplace boy, with a rough broad-brimmed straw hat, through which brim the sun shone from behind. The toys he carried were a multiplying-glass and a kaleidoscope. I sighed and departed. (110)

Anodos’s shadow can be (and has been)⁵¹ interpreted in many ways, but this passage makes clear that one of the things it does is render the fantastic as commonplace. Though Anodos is at first dismayed, as indicated by his sigh, he soon “[begins] to feel something like satisfaction in the presence of the shadow” because it “shows me things in their true colour and form I will not see beauty where there is none. I will dare to behold things as they are” (112). However, Anodos is not seeing things as they are; because of his shadow, he sees them through the distortion of the commonplace, which blinds him to the true reality behind it. This results in a selfish and self-satisfied pride that leads him to force a singing globe, her most precious possession, away from a young girl, breaking it and leaving her devastated (114-16). Writing of this passage, Raeper suggests that “MacDonald is pointing out that we need more than just our five senses to appreciate the world” (*George MacDonald* 149); we need to be open to things beyond those five senses, because the senses do not always reveal what is really going on.

The Bags in *Lilith* make a similar point. On his journey, Vane encounters two groups, the Little Ones, a group of children, and the Bad Giants, or Bags. Vane is captured

⁵¹ For example, see Brawley (2006), “Ideal and the Shadow”; Hein (1982), *Harmony Within*; Prickett (2005), *Victorian Fantasy*; Raeper (1987), *George MacDonald*; Reis (1972), *George MacDonald*; and Robb (1987), *God’s Fiction*.

by the Bags and forced to scrape bark off unproductive tree branches (84). He wonders “whether I had not come upon a sort of fungoid people, with just enough mind to give them motion and the expressions of anger and greed” (83). Furthermore, “they hate every live thing but themselves” (85). Investigating further, he learns from Lona, the leader of the Little Ones, that the Bags started out as Little Ones: “If a Little One doesn’t care, he grows greedy, and then lazy, and then big, and then stupid, and then bad. The dull creatures don’t know that they come from us. Very few of them believe we are anywhere. They say *Nonsense!*” (92). Lona goes on to point out one of the Little Ones who is on his way to becoming a giant and notes that their first clue that it was happening was when “he would not believe anything told him” (93). In another spot, she claims that the “giants have lost themselves” (94). The Bags have lost sight of a reality beyond their own daily existence. They willfully reject the existence of the Little Ones, and refuse to see any but themselves as having any value. Like Anodos, this rejection of anything beyond their own immediate reality leads to an increase in selfishness and greed, until they become what Vane describes: having “just enough mind” for “anger and greed.”

Citing Anodos’s shadow, Hein argues that “MacDonald persistently sees this skeptical rationalism that precipitates doubt as the greatest threat to healthy spirituality” (*Harmony Within* 35-36). The non-fantasies also include their share of characters who embrace skepticism and willfully reject the idea of a larger reality. One of the most distinctive characteristics of Thomas Galbraith in *Sir Gibbie* (1879) is his complete and utter rejection of anything that could be called “superstition.” MacDonald writes that nothing “brought him nearer to the outer verge of displeasure than . . . anything whatever to which he could affix the name superstition” (118). Galbraith justifies this in the name of religion, but MacDonald elaborates further: “He was not only unaware, but incapable of becoming aware, that he professed to believe a number of things, any one of which was

infinitely more hostile to the truth of the universe than all the fancies and fables of a country side" (118). Ultimately, Galbraith develops an overwhelming sense of pride, so that "whatever another believed, which he did not choose to believe, he set down at once as superstition" (171). Not only does he reject anything which exists outside the limited realm of everyday experience, he rejects anything that exists outside his *own* experience. For Galbraith, if he does not believe it, it is not so. Just as Anodos's shadow leads him to take a pride in his ability to see "the truth," Galbraith's refusal to open his mind to anything belonging to the marvelous gives him too high an opinion of his own intelligence: "he had a faith in his own business faculty quite as foolish as any superstition in Gormgarnet" (193). This false sense of his own abilities leads him to start speculating with his money, and eventually, he loses everything (362). A true understanding of reality, including the ability to see his own actions through the lens of that reality, would have saved Galbraith both suffering and disgrace. His stubborn refusal to admit the existence of a wider reality destroys his life.

One of the biggest culprits, in MacDonald's opinion, was "society," which dictated a particular way of seeing the world and rejected all other viewpoints. In an 1853 letter to his father, he wrote "Let us beware of worshipping this idol of the populace in any sense, even by fearing before it—and so seeking the praise of men and not the praise of God" (Sadler 68-69). MacDonald made a clear distinction between society's perspective and an eternal perspective. In *Hope of the Gospel* (1892), MacDonald explains, "The world's man, its great, its successful, its honorable man, is he who may have and do what he pleases, whose strength lies in money and the praise of men; the greatest in the kingdom of heaven is the man who is humblest and serves his fellows the most" ("Heirs of Heaven and Earth" 83). A desire for approbation and prestige was one of Galbraith's strongest driving factors (*Sir Gibbie* 192). The dampening power of society on a person's willingness and ability to

recognize true reality is a frequent theme in MacDonald's work. *Mary Marston* (1881) is a prominent example, as the novel is full of characters who place the limited rules and definitions of society above those of eternity. MacDonald establishes this early in the novel, when Letty Lovel is chastised by her aunt for associating with Mary, who works in a shop. The aunt's reasoning is that Mary's status as a shop-girl means that she is not a "lady." Letty asks about another local woman, and is told that she is considered a lady, despite the questionable origin of her fortune, although the aunt seems to disagree with the appellation (17). Letty is perplexed by this, averring that "if Mrs. Cropper is not a lady, how can Mary Marston not be one? She is as different from Mrs. Cropper as one woman can be from another" (18). To this Letty's aunt replies, "Because she has not the position in society" (18). This is an end to the debate. Society defines "lady" in one particular way, and no other definition is permissible, regardless of the personal qualities (good or bad) of the individual.

This attitude defines most of the major characters in *Mary Marston*, and MacDonald explores the lengths to which people will go to satisfy society. This is most clearly explored in the sub-plot surrounding Hesper Mortimer, who is informed by her mother that her father has arranged her marriage with Mr. Redmain, to which she responds "How much has the man promised to pay for me?" Describing the mother's attitude, MacDonald writes:

It was not only born in Lady Malice's blood, but from earliest years had been impressed on her brain, that her first duty was to her family, and mainly consisted in getting well out of its way—in going peaceably through the fire to Moloch, that the rest might have good places in the Temple of Mammon. In her turn, she had trained her children to the bewildering conclusion that it was duty to do a certain wrong, if it should be required. (82)

MacDonald's language is intentionally strong here. In a chapter entitled, "The Human

Sacrifice,” MacDonald likens this parental-arranged mercenary marriage to a human sacrifice, and more specifically, to a mother sacrificing her own child to a false god, one of the most horrific acts imaginable. And the reason behind it is a desire to maintain social status:

One thing she did know, and that swallowed up all the rest—that her husband’s affairs were so involved as to threaten absolute poverty; and what woman of the world would not count damnation better than that?—while Mr. Redmain was rolling in money. Had she known everything bad of her daughter’s suitor, short of legal crime, for her this would have covered it all.

(85)

On some level, Lady Mortimer knows what she is doing to her daughter, forcing her into a loveless marriage; the same thing was done to her (85). She willfully chooses not to see it. She is blinded by her devotion to society, refusing to see anything beyond society’s narrow definition of reality. Her willful rejection of any other view of reality causes her to commit a truly despicable act.

Nor does MacDonald spare Hesper. Her parents offer Hesper little choice, but legally at the time of the story, they had no power to force her into a marriage against her consent. However unwilling she might be, Hesper consents to marry a man she despises, without even putting up much of a fight. MacDonald describes:

It is one thing to see things as they are; to be consumed with indignation at the wrong; to shiver with aversion to the abominable; and quite another to rouse the will to confront the evil, and resist him until he flee. For this the whole education of Hesper had tended to unfit her. What she had been taught—and that in a world rendered possible only by the self-denial of a God—was to drift with the stream, denying herself only that divine strength

of honest love, which would soonest help her to breast it. (85)

Hesper can see the world around her through a different lens than that of society. She is horrified by what she sees. However, like her mother, she willfully chooses to reject that view and “drift with the stream.” To a certain extent, she is a victim of her upbringing which never taught her an eternal perspective was possible, but MacDonald does not deny Hesper’s culpability. She makes the choice to submit to her parents’ wishes, and her reasons, once again, come back to seeing the world through a limited perception of reality. However much she loathes Mr. Redmain, she nonetheless covets the admiration of society that she will receive as Mrs. Redmain.

She eventually does receive this admiration, but as MacDonald illustrates, the praise of society proves empty. MacDonald describes her state of mind as she sits fire-gazing:

There was not much to see in the fire, for the fire is but a reflector, and there was not much behind the eyes that looked into it for that fire to reflect.

Hesper was no dreamer—the more was the pity, for dreams are often the stuff out of which actions are made. Had she been a truer woman, she might have been a dreamer, but where was the space for dreaming in a life like hers, without heaven, therefore without horizon, with so much room for desiring, and so little room for hope? The buzz that greeted her entrance of a drawing-room, was the chief joy she knew . . . Education she had had but little that was worth the name, for she had never been set growing; and now, although well endowed by nature, she was gradually becoming stupid.

People who have plenty of money, and neither hope nor aspiration, must become stupid, except indeed they hate, and then for a time the devil in them will make them a sort of clever. (151)

She is greatly admired, creating a “buzz” when she enters a room, but she is not happy. Her

life is essentially empty. She has no hopes, no dreams, no aspirations. She has nothing beyond being admired and accepted by her society.

Her friendship with Mary offers hope for Hesper. As she begins to spend time with Mary, she is exposed to a different way of viewing the world, a way that takes an eternal perspective. When asked by Letty about the “lady” question, Mary’s response is telling:

I cannot consent, Letty . . . to trouble myself mind about it as you do. I cannot afford it. Society is neither my master nor my servant, neither my father nor my sister; and so long as she does not bar my way to the kingdom of heaven, which is the only society worth getting into, I feel no right to complain of how she treats me. I have no claim on her; I do not acknowledge her laws—hardly her existence, and she has no authority over me. (18)

Mary views the world through an eternal perspective; she filters everything through her belief in and relationship with God. Her actions and her interpretation of social relationships are rooted in a larger vision of reality. As Hesper begins to get to know Mary, while working on Hesper’s wedding dress (131-32), Mary’s views offer Hesper an alternative way. Had Hesper allowed it, Mary could have given her the strength to challenge her parents, but Hesper rejects Mary’s views, marries Mr. Redmain, and moves away. After a time, Mary and Hesper meet again, and Mary becomes Hesper’s companion/maid. Mary accepts the position out of a desire to be of service to Hesper, but Hesper remains steadfastly closed off to Mary’s point of view. During one of their discussions, MacDonald comments that Hesper thought Mary’s questions were “stupid” and that “she did not even choose to hear” questions that asked her to look beyond society’s way of seeing things (202). Hesper continues to insist that society’s way is the only way, even asserting that, in Heaven, “there will be a good deal of allowance made for some people . . .

. Society makes such demands!” (204). In the end, Hesper’s inability to see anything beyond her own limited sphere makes her so selfish that she refuses to allow Mary to take some time off to help a friend whose baby has just died. In Hesper’s view, her own need to have Mary available to help her dress and fix her hair outweighs the needs of a bereaved mother. Mary is so infuriated by Hesper’s selfishness that she resigns and goes where she can actually be of help to someone, leaving Hesper alone in her selfishness (239-40). Hesper’s stubborn refusal to open her mind and her heart to a reality other than what she saw around her causes her to drive away the only real friend she ever had.

Mary Marston is full of characters who are blinded by society’s limited view of reality and who suffer for it. MacDonald believed that closing oneself off from the larger truth of reality is dangerous. It frequently leads to unhappiness and trouble. Nonetheless, the situation does not have to be hopeless. To be sure, many of MacDonald’s minor characters, such as Mr. Galbraith and Lady Mortimer, cannot or do not ever change. They remain closed off through the events of the novel and the implication is that they will remain that way in perpetuity due to their own stubbornness. But other characters escape; they find their way to a right understanding of reality. Even Hesper’s story ends hopefully as she finds love in a new relationship following her husband’s death, but it also implies that she still has a long way to go (355). Unfortunately, Hesper’s transformation takes place off-stage, so the reader never sees how she finds her way.

In other novels, however, MacDonald does show the transformation. Florimel, in *The Marquis of Lossie* (1877), is a good example of how a person can be misled by society and how he/she can learn to view reality correctly again. In *Malcolm* (1875), Florimel is a young woman who enjoys the sense of freedom she has living in the country and who “rebelled utterly” at the suggestion that she needs a governess (170). She enjoys a good ghost story (256) and likes to read romances (258). She even uses bad language in the

presence of company, albeit as a ploy to shame her father into giving up his own bad language (118). Altogether, Florimel is a naïve and somewhat sheltered, but generally good, young lady. *The Marquis of Lossie* is, in part, the story of the battle within Florimel between society's way of thinking and a right way of thinking. In the sequel, Florimel has ascended to be the Marchioness of Lossie. While the reader knows that she has no actual claim to that title, Florimel believes it is hers and the position goes to her head. She is whisked away by a family friend and is soon "circling the vortex of the London season" (8). It is not long before society's influences begin to work on Florimel. Malcolm hears a rumor that Florimel is going to be married to Lord Liffore, a man he knows to be a "bla'guard" (18), and goes to London to find her. He follows her to the theater, where he notes that "Already something had begun to supplant the girl-freedom that had formerly in every look and motion asserted itself She was more stately, but the stateliness had a little hardness mingled with it" (31). Florimel has begun to sense a change herself. Where she expected "an enlargement of life in the sense of freedom and power which came with the knowledge of being a great lady, possessed of the rare privilege of an ancient title and an inheritance," she instead finds that "as to freedom, she had less of that than before" (46). She finds that she makes up her own mind less frequently and that her own will is routinely subjected to that of the people around her (51).

Eventually, the battle between ways of thinking becomes embodied in the difference between Florimel's two suitors: Lord Liffore and the painter Raoul Lenorme. Florimel's friends and Liffore's family are pushing her towards him. Even Florimel assumes that their eventual marriage is "destined," despite her doubts about his suitability as a husband (51-52). Yet she feels irresistibly drawn towards Lenorme, who has fallen head-over heels in love with her. Lenorme is an honorable man (48), but Florimel's feelings are to her a source of "shame and degradation" because "in the circle in which she moved she heard

professions, arts, and trades alluded to with the same unspoken, but the more strongly implied contempt—a contempt indeed regarded as so much a matter of course, so thoroughly understood, so reasonable in its nature, so absolute in its degree, that to utter it would have been bad taste from very superfluity” (51). She knows he is a good man, but society will not allow her to acknowledge his goodness, nor recognize her interest as anything less than degrading. Marriage to poor-but-good Lenorme would be disgrace in the eyes of society, while marriage to the rich-but-rotten Liftingore would increase her prestige. Eventually, Florimel breaks with Lenorme and he leaves the country (142). She does not marry Liftingore either, however, and here MacDonald’s views of the importance of the imagination come into play. Florimel has, to a certain extent, like Hesper, rejected a way of seeing the world besides that of society. She rejects an eternal perspective that would see Lenorme as a true man, which would make him a good match regardless of his social status. However, unlike Hesper, Florimel has been taught to dream, and she begins to dream of Lenorme. MacDonald explains that “even the poorest dreaming has its influences, and the result of hers was that the attentions of Liftingore became again distasteful to her” (152). Florimel’s ability to dream slows her downward progression, but because that ability is ultimately not rooted in truth, it does not stop her decline.

Gradually, Florimel becomes increasingly caught up in society’s way of thinking. When presented with the fact that Liftingore fathered an illegitimate child, Florimel cares nothing for the news. She is, of course, shocked that anyone would discuss such matters in her presence, but the news itself hardly causes her pause (239). Even when brought face to face with the child and his discarded mother, Florimel’s reaction is anger at the girl and at Malcolm for bringing them face to face, not at Liftingore (357-58). Florimel has made her decision. She has chosen to willfully blind herself to Liftingore’s unworthiness in the name of a society which demands “the acceptance of [unseemly] things as necessary” (239). She

supports him in his unkind treatment of the mother of his child. At this point, the plot swoops in to save Florimel from herself. Malcolm reveals that she is not the Marchioness of Lossie, that she has, in fact, no legal right even to the name she has always claimed. Malcolm's mother was clandestinely, but legally, married to their father, and the date of her death erased the marriage to Florimel's mother. Knowing she has a "choice between sending Liftore away [or] being abandoned by him," she sends him away (365). Malcolm arranges a reunion with Lenorme who wants to marry Florimel, despite her newfound disgrace in the eyes of society (368). Florimel has a happy ending, but she does not bring it upon herself. She stubbornly refuses to look true reality in the face, rejecting anything outside her narrowly defined view, until reality forcibly breaks in and shatters the false vision, forcing her to re-evaluate her way of seeing the world. Had she not chosen to reject a true understanding of reality in favor of a false vision, she would have been spared a great deal of heartache and embarrassment.

MacDonald believed that willingness to keep one's eyes open to a true understanding of reality is essential to a healthy spiritual and emotional life. He saw too many of his contemporaries trying to put limitations on reality, either by rejecting anything not understandable through scientific and commonplace facts or by viewing everything through the limiting lens of society. True reality involves many things that cannot be accounted for by facts, things marvelous and extraordinary. True reality also involves recognizing people and actions for who and what they are, regardless of the labels placed on them by society. It means interpreting all things through the lens of eternity, not through the limited lens of human experience and social conditioning. Willfully rejecting this larger sense of reality causes people to become selfish and self-centered. It breeds hypocrisy and cruelty. MacDonald presents a number of characters in this situation. They are not heroes and heroines, nor are they villains. They are simply people who refuse to see the

complexities of reality and who suffer the consequences of their willful blindness, setting an example for his readers of ways not to be.

Characters who Possess Misguided Perceptions of Reality

Having a right sense of reality is not simply a matter of keeping an open mind, however, or even about recognizing that reality contains more than is readily perceptible. The mind has to be open in the right direction. A character can be open to a sense of a larger reality, but still have very wrong ideas about that reality. For some, this is because of choices they have made themselves, through the willful misuse of their openness. For others, a lack of proper training has led to their trouble. Both groups are widely represented in MacDonald's fiction.

Characters whose Perception is Twisted by their own Decisions

These characters tend to be open to other realities, even actively curious about them, but their interest is selfish and misguided. MacDonald valued curiosity when it was used for the right purposes and in the right way; the pursuit of knowledge for selfish reasons, however, is a dangerous thing. *David Elginbrod's* Herr von Funkelstein stands out as an example of this. Funkelstein first appears when Hugh stumbles upon a lecture on mesmerism and hypnosis and sits next to him. Funkelstein acknowledges himself to be an expert on the subject (191-93), as well as on other occult activities (217-21). His desire for this knowledge is Funkelstein's dominant characteristic; unsurprisingly, he is a very dangerous man. He brutally kills a cat with a poisoned saber (193-94). He uses his knowledge of mesmerism to force Euphra to do his bidding (301). He introduces experiments in the occult into the household of Hugh's employer, resulting in deleterious effects on several people (217-21). He steals from and beats up Hugh (287). He does all of this to obtain a crystal which once belonged to an ancestor of Euphra's. That Funkelstein is not a nice man is already clear; this crystal sheds telling light upon his motivations. He is

not seeking wealth. Though he steals a diamond ring from Hugh, that is a crime of convenience; it was not his primary objective. His objective was the crystal, and the crystal possesses very little intrinsic financial value. Robert Falconer, consulted by Hugh, suggests that he may seek the crystal as a means of gaining additional knowledge of “demons and their counsels” (359).⁵² Funkelstein’s interest in the occult was well established during the experiments, and he clearly already possesses a certain faculty for contacting the unseen world; he seeks the crystal to increase that faculty. MacDonald’s portrayal of these experiments indicates that Funkelstein was tampering with something evil. He believes in an existence beyond what is seen, but his interest is warped by his quest for unholy power.⁵³

Another example of a warped view of reality comes in *Donal Grant*. Whereas Funkelstein’s view of reality is warped by his desire for demonic knowledge, Lord Morven’s is warped by long-term experimentation with drugs. Though MacDonald explains that Morven “made no pretence even to himself of seeking therein the furtherance of knowledge,” he nonetheless seeks to understand “the power of certain drugs” (227). Though he may claim that he is not after knowledge, the earl seeks to alter his reality by finding out “how this or that, thus or thus modified or combined, would contribute to his living a life such as he would have it, and other quite than that ordered for him by a power which least of all powers he chose to acknowledge” (227). Like Funkelstein, Morven’s indulgences have led him to a dangerous place, both for himself and others. He does not merely indulge in the drugs himself; he puts them in the wine he serves to unsuspecting dinner guests, for no purpose other than to see what effect they have (159). In his drug-addled state, he attempts to murder his niece. She is rescued by Donal, but the earl was perfectly content to leave her to die (351). Furthermore, his indulgences have taken a toll on his own health, both physical and spiritual. MacDonald explains that “however the

⁵² An interest in crystal-gazing swept across England’s part of the interest in Spiritualism (Barrow 49-52).

⁵³ See Chapter Three for more about these experiments.

drugs might vary in their operations upon him, to one thing they all tended—the destruction of his moral nature” (227-28). Morven attempts to justify his horrible actions, saying “I cannot be counted guilty of many things; they were done under the influence of hellish concoctions. It was not I, but these things working in me—on my brain, making me see things in a false light!” (294). Donal gently reminds him that it was his own decision to take the drugs in the first place (294-95). To a certain extent, Morven has succeeded in altering his reality, but the cost is enormous, and no drug can eradicate his responsibility for his actions. Despite all his efforts, true reality catches up with him in the end, and he has to face it.

MacDonald’s novels repeatedly show the dangers that come when a person’s view of reality becomes twisted. Again, it becomes plain that it is not enough to simply be open to a larger sense of reality. That openness has to be properly directed. A desire for power, knowledge, or control is not enough. It may open up a wider lens through which to view reality, but it is still a false lens. As Donal reminds Morven, “the other world does not need our believing in it to make a fact of it” (293). Only when trying to see that world for what it really is can one begin to come to a true understanding of reality.

Characters whose Perception is Twisted by Bad Training

For some people, their false perceptions of reality do not come because of their own actions. MacDonald also presents characters whose understandings of reality are diseased because of external influences and education. One of the primary forms this takes is bad religious teaching. Bad religious teaching was something MacDonald fought throughout his career, both as a minister and as a writer.⁵⁴ He writes:

It is one thing where evil doctrines are quietly held, and the truth associated

⁵⁴ MacDonald’s theology has been written about at length, by theologians and literary critics alike. For example, see Dearborn (2006), *Baptized Imagination*; Gerold (2004), “Theology for the Sake of God’s Children”; Gerold (2006), “Children of God”; Hein (1993), *Victorian Mythmaker*; Neuhouser (2008), “George MacDonald and Universalism”; and Yamaguchi (2007), *George MacDonald’s Challenging Theology*.

with them assimilated by good people doing their best with what has been taught them, and quite another thing where they are forced upon some shrinking nature, weak to resist through the very reverence which is its excellence. The finer nature, from inability to think another of less pure intent than itself, is often at a great disadvantage in the hands of the coarser. (*Donal Grant* 219)

MacDonald always recognizes the right and responsibility of individuals to seek the truth for themselves. Spiritual teaching is important because it aids the individual on his/her search. When teaching becomes a replacement for individual seeking, it becomes a problem:

Every generation must do its own seeking and its own finding. The fault of the fathers often is that they expect their finding to stand in place of their children's seeking—expect the children to receive that which has satisfied the need of their fathers upon their testimony; whereas rightly, their testimony is not ground for their children's belief, only for their children's search. That search is faith in the bud. No man can be sure till he has found for himself. (“Miracles Granted to the Prayer of Friends” 325-26)

MacDonald saw this as a problem throughout his society, and in his novels, MacDonald illustrates the damage that can be done, and the suffering that can be caused by inculcating such a twisted vision of reality.

One of the best examples comes in *Donal Grant*, where Lady Arctura readily accepts the existence of a larger reality whose center is God, but her understanding of that reality has been distorted by a stream of bad religious teaching for most of her life. She suffers greatly in consequence. MacDonald first describes her as having “a seemingly habitual expression of pain” around her mouth (74). MacDonald explains:

The keen conscience and obedient heart of the girl had made her very early turn herself towards the quarter where the sun ought to rise, the quarter where all night long gleams the auroral hope; but unhappily she had not gone direct to the heavenly well in earthly ground—the words of the Master himself. How could she? From very childhood her mind had been filled with traditionary utterances concerning the divine character and divine plans—the merest inventions of men far more desirous of understanding what they were not required to understand, than of doing what they were required to do—whence their crude and false utterances concerning a God of their own fancy. (78)

Arctura wants to believe. She wants to love God and live her life as He would have her live it. But, according to MacDonald, the ideas she has been taught about God make it impossible for her to do that. Consequently, Arctura suffers: “What can there be in heaven or earth for a soul that believes in an unjust God? To rejoice in such a belief would be to be a devil, and to believe what cannot be rejoiced in, is misery” (82). As she gets to know Donal, Arctura is exposed to a different way of thinking, to a different vision of God, of a God whose primary characteristic is absolute, unchanging love for his creation. Gradually, though still plagued with periodic doubts, Arctura’s vision of reality is reshaped by the truths she learns from Donal. In the end, she has come to fully embrace a true vision of reality, with a deeper understanding of the nature of God.

Un-Twisting the Twisted Perception of Reality

One of the most characteristic attributes of MacDonald’s fiction is the overwhelming idea that no one is ever hopelessly lost. Even the most villainous of his villains are given the chance of redemption. A closed-off vision of reality can be opened, and a twisted perception of reality can be untwisted. MacDonald wanted to teach his

readers, to train their imaginations to perceive reality correctly. To this end, he shows the correcting of some misguided perceptions. Removed from the pernicious influences around her, Arctura makes rapid progress towards imaginative health. With Donal's help, Lord Morven begins to recover from his addiction and makes strides in the direction of repentance and redemption.

The setting right of twisted views of reality is a major sub-plot of *Guild Court* (1868). This aspect of the story focuses on two young girls: Mattie Kitley, the daughter of a bookseller, and Poppie, a parentless child of the London streets. Mattie and Poppie both possess distorted views of reality, but they embody opposite extremes. Mattie is an odd child, with little of the childlike about her, which MacDonald calls "[o]ne of the saddest and not least common sights in the world[,] the face of a child whose mind is so brimful of worldly wisdom that the human childishness has vanished from it, as well as the divine childlikeness" ("The Child in the Midst" 2). She has a very old-fashioned way of speaking (33), and in one place MacDonald refers to "the two old ladies," by whom he means Lucy's grandmother and eight-year-old Mattie (110). She lacks curiosity and is content to believe that life in Guild Court is all that matters. Mattie has lived her entire life in London, only rarely even leaving Guild Court. Consequently, her world is very small, with no room for the marvelous in it. She dislikes nature because "it is full of things that die" (178). She also suffers from a strange fear of her father's books; she claims that they talk to her, but she does not mean that she reads them (87). She believes in God, but she filters what she knows about him through her limited experiences, such as when she complains because He made "the sun [shine] in the window a whole hour" (37). Mattie's "reality" is excessively limited and downright unhealthy. Because of this, Mattie suffers. She believes she is actively tormented by a demonic being she calls "Syne" (95), and she has recurrent bouts of brain fever (83, 157). Her condition is actually quite serious.

By herself, Mattie makes a frightening image of how limited a person's reality can become, but she is not alone. MacDonald pairs her up with Poppie. Poppie has had no parental supervision and no training, formal or informal. She goes where and does what she wishes. Everything she does is instinctual, uninfluenced by social norms, but equally uninfluenced by a belief in anything beyond her own experiences. Poppie has an imagination, but it too is purely instinctual. It responds, but it does not actively engage with the world around her. For example, Poppie is drawn by Lucy's red cloak, which MacDonald calls "a fountain of warmth to [her] imagination" (59). She bursts into tears at the sight of a rose tree (104), but it is purely an emotional response; there is no thought accompanying it. Likewise, her imagination frequently misinterprets things. Sneaking into Madame Tussaud's, she interprets it as a resting place for the wealthy dead who, she thinks, must be "disposed of in a manner very different from the funerals she had been allowed to be present at" (59-60). For Poppie, reality exists purely in the moment and in her life. What immediately affects her is real. What does not, does not matter. MacDonald sets the two girls as foils for each other:

[Mattie] thought; Poppie only received impressions All Poppie's thoughts, to speak roughly, came from without; all Mattie's from within. To complete Mattie, she had to go back a little, and learn to receive impressions too; to complete Poppie, she had to work upon the impressions she received, and, so to speak, generate thoughts of her own. Mattie led the life of a human being; Poppie of a human animal. Mattie lived; Poppie was there.

(193)

Both Mattie and Poppie are in an unhealthy mental and spiritual condition.

However, MacDonald is not content simply to leave them there, and it is through the reshaping of their understanding of reality that the two girls grow stronger. For Poppie, this

means using what she is capable of appreciating as a means of reaching her. Several characters in the book express interest in helping to “civilize” Poppie and make her a more presentable member of society. For example, Lucy, the novel’s heroine, thinks giving Poppie a bath, some new clothes, and some social education is the way to go, so she takes Poppie to a children’s party being held by a rich friend of hers. Though interested at first, Poppie soon grows bored and runs off (107-09). When Lucy later approaches her about going back to those friends to deliver a message, Poppie protests that they will just force her into another bath (159). Lucy’s initial methods may not be the best for Poppie, but she is drawn to Lucy nonetheless. For all her lack of training and education, for all that she is a “human animal,” Poppie is still human, and she has an instinctive awareness of key elements of true reality. Most notably, she recognizes love when she sees it. She recognizes it between Lucy and Tom (59), and she recognizes it when, for the first time in her memory, it is aimed to and from herself. Poppie gives Lucy a present, a piece of shiny red glass she found in the street. Lucy is so overcome by the spontaneous show of love that she kisses Poppie, which in turn causes Poppie to cry “for the first time since she had been an infant” (102-03). This one kiss does more good for Poppie than any number of forced baths could do, and when she later asks Lucy for another kiss in return for taking that message and Lucy responds that she will kiss her as often as she comes to see her with a clean face, Poppie promptly returns with a washed face (159-60). Poppie instinctively recognizes and responds to love, which is an embodiment of God. True reality is alive in Poppie; it just needs some encouragement.

Ultimately, it is through carefully challenging and cultivating Poppie’s sense of reality that she begins to grow and develop. Mr. Spelt, a tailor in the square, decides to try to adopt Poppie, but he knows that he has to be careful how he goes about it. If he tries too hard, she will simply run away and he will never see her again. So he begins subtly, by

leaving a piece of candy in the street where she'll find it. He does this for a few days in succession, until she gets used to finding it, until it becomes a part of her reality. Then, he attaches a string to the candy, and when Poppie comes along, he tugs the string to draw Poppie closer to him. MacDonald describes her reaction: "Certainly she had never seen a living lollypop, yet motion is a chief sign of life, and the lollypop certainly moved. Perhaps it would have been wiser to doubt her senses first, but Poppie had never yet found her senses in the wrong, and therefore had not learned to doubt them" (167). This leads to a friendly acquaintance between Poppie and Spelt. His kindness toward her establishes a bond between them, and when Poppie needs help, after being injured by the woman she frequently stays with, she runs directly to Mr. Spelt. By expanding Poppie's reality through the presence and strange behavior of sweets, Spelt also teaches Poppie to expand her reality to include kindness and friendship, concepts previously unknown to her. Eventually, Poppie begins to identify Mr. Spelt as her father (264). Between Lucy and Mr. Spelt, Poppie begins to grow: "Having once got a glimpse of light, her eyes, if they opened slowly, strengthened rapidly. Her acquisition was not great, that is, but she learned to think with an amount of reality which showed that, while she retained many of the defects of childhood, she retained also some of its most valuable characteristics" (357). MacDonald explains that having gotten "out of the natural track of the human being," her "return to that track, indicating an awakening of the nature that was in her, may well be called a sign of redemption" (263). Once she begins to be exposed to and to understand true reality, through the experience of kindness, friendship, and love, Poppie begins to grow by leaps and bounds.

For Mattie, a different approach is necessary. Whereas Poppie still has some of the "defects of childhood" to grow out of, Mattie needs to grow into childhood, to develop more of a child-like wonder through which to view reality. As noted above, MacDonald

frequently comments on Mattie's old-fashionedness; consequently, the name of Mattie's tormentor, Syne, seems significant. Although the novel is set in London, MacDonald knew that *syne* is the Scottish word for *since* or *before now*. Essentially, Mattie has too much "before now." She has too much time, too much history. Literally, of course, this is not the case, as she is just eight years old. Figuratively, MacDonald makes it clear that Mattie is emotionally much older than her age—too old, in fact, to be healthy. She needs to grow younger, to learn to respond naturally to things. For this to happen, she needs to encounter things beyond her usual sphere of experience and enlarge her understanding of reality. Lucy takes Mattie with her to Hastings. After falling asleep on the train, Mattie's first experience of her new location takes place when she wakes up in the morning and looks out her window, overlooking the sea; she is overcome and, like Poppie with the roses, breaks down in tears. MacDonald explains:

Mattie had been all her life sitting in the camera-obscura of her own microcosm, watching the shadows that went and came, and now first she looked up and out upon the world beyond and above her. All her doings had gone on in the world of her own imaginings; and although that big brain of hers contained—no, I cannot say *contained*, but what else am I to say?—a being greater than all that is seen, heard, or handled, yet the outward show of divine imagination which now met her eyes might well overpower that world within her. (198)

At first, Mattie is frightened by the big-ness of the world she sees. She says "I used to think that God could see me when I was in London. But how he is to see me in this great place, with so many things about, cocks and larks and all, I can't think. I'm so little! I'm hardly worth taking care of" (200). Mattie begins to learn that the universe around her and the God at the center of it are both much bigger than she previously thought. She opens her mind to

that wider world and, like Poppie, begins to grow rapidly. MacDonald claims that by the time “she left Hastings, Mattie was almost a child” (265). By the end of the novel, “Poppie was getting wiser, and Mattie was getting merrier” (357), and both have grown in their ability to perceive reality correctly. MacDonald saw misguided perceptions of reality all around him, and he recreates them in his novels as warnings for his readers. Through characters like Mattie and Poppie, he also shows how the misguided perception can be set right.

Characters who Openly Embrace a Right Vision of Reality

MacDonald’s novels are not populated exclusively by limited or warped perceptions of reality. On the contrary, his novels are full of characters possessing the view of reality that MacDonald sought to convey to his readers. These are MacDonald’s best characters, both in terms of personal goodness and literary qualities. As discussed above, the general consensus among MacDonald critics is that MacDonald was at his best when writing these characters, although some critics still complain that these characters are unrealistic. Nonetheless, these are characters that MacDonald wanted his readers to admire, identify with, and emulate.

MacDonald’s purpose with these characters is two-fold. He demonstrates lives lived in full acceptance of ultimate reality, and he also challenges his readers to expand their ways of thinking about the world about them. One way he does this is by presenting characters who would have been judged by society to be inferior, either mentally or physically, and then showing that, in fact, these characters are superior to the majority of society because they are aware of a larger reality surrounding them. Reis has dubbed these MacDonald’s “handicapped saints” and singled them out as “the most characteristic and effective of MacDonald’s people” (*George MacDonald* 70). There is truth in this assessment, though, as already discussed, Reis still believes the novels in which these

characters appear are creative failures. Actually, a closer look reveals just how successfully MacDonald uses these characters to advance his creative purposes.

First, MacDonald's novels present a number of characters with intellectual disabilities. Frank Riga (1991) suggests that "a traditional belief holds that idiots, the simple-minded, and epileptics are under the special providence of God and are allowed privileged communication with Him. They have often been regarded as holy and as seers. MacDonald perhaps knew this ancient belief" ("From Time to Eternity" 95). In *Adela Cathcart* (1864), MacDonald writes, "Who can tell how many have been counted fools simply because they were prophets; or how much of the madness in the world may be the utterance of thoughts true and just, but belonging to a region differing from ours in its nature and scenery!" (122). He embodies this idea in numerous characters throughout his fiction. Characters such as Feel Jock (*Adela Cathcart*, "The Bell") and Steenie (*Heather and Snow*) embody this. Another good example is Stephen Stewart, the "Mad Laird" in *Malcolm* (1875). Known throughout the town as either a "fool" or a "madman" (9), Stewart likes to wander around in the open air all night. He possesses a deep "antipathy" towards his mother (127) and runs off with his fingers in his ears whenever anyone mentions the word (8). He is universally recognized as a kind-hearted man, over whom "blew ever and anon the air of a sweet humanity" (8). He has a deep kinship with nature; the animals recognize him as safe and kind (325-26). Moreover, the laird's central concerns are not the same as most people's. He wants to know where he came from. His plaintive cry of "I dinna ken whaur I cam frae" is repeated throughout the book, as both a statement and a question, but always as the utterance of a deep desire for an answer. His question is more than it seems, however, because he does know the answer. He explains, "I dinna ken whaur I cam frae, and I dinna ken whaur I'm gaun till; but I ken 'at I'm gaun *whaur* I cam frae" (8). This explanation ties in with MacDonald's belief that death is not the end, but a new

beginning, a returning to our original home with God (“Jesus in the World” 51-52). His desire to know where he comes from is more accurately a desire to better know the God from whence he came. He expresses this desire, saying “Gien he wad but come oot an’ shaw himsel’!” (354). The laird might be “mad” in the eyes of the world, but MacDonald suggests that his mind is actually more right than other people because his focus is truly where it belongs—in an eternal reality where God is the center.

In addition to characters who actually do suffer from intellectual disabilities, MacDonald presents characters who have been mistakenly judged by their society. These characters are viewed as having impairments, but MacDonald makes it clear that they do not. Society is merely incapable or unwilling to see the truth. Little Diamond in *At the Back of the North Wind* (1871) may be the clearest example of this. After Diamond’s journey to the land at the back of the North Wind (93-126), he is a different person. His reactions to things have changed; he is more peaceful, and he is more good.⁵⁵ MacDonald explains “If my reader find it hard to believe that Diamond should be so good, he must remember that he had been to the back of the north wind. If he never knew a boy so good, did he ever know a boy that had been to the back of the north wind? It was not in the least strange of Diamond to behave as he did; on the contrary, it was thoroughly sensible of him” (153). When Diamond subsequently takes up residence in London, where he learns to drive a cab, the other cab drivers cannot understand him: “because his face was so quiet and sweet, with a smile always either awake or asleep in his eyes, and because he never heeded their ugly words and rough jokes, they said he wasn’t all there, meaning that he was half an idiot, whereas he was a great deal more there than they had the sense to see” (166). What makes Diamond “more there” are his experiences with North Wind. He has had contact with true reality; he knows that true reality and has made it a part of himself. Diamond is

⁵⁵ Grammatically, this should say “better.” However, “more good” actually better expresses the meaning here. Diamond possesses more of goodness than the other characters in the book. He is not simply a better person. He is more good.

not actually “half an idiot”; he is a more complete person than those who see only this, limited, reality.

Sir Gibbie, from the book of the same name (1879) is another example. In this case, Gibbie is mute. He cannot speak, but that is not the sole reason people, first in Aberdeen, then in the country, consider him an “idiot” or an “innocent.” Significantly, MacDonald does not reveal Gibbie’s muteness until nearly a hundred pages into the story (96). The primary reason for his reputation in Aberdeen is his “practical honesty and his too evident love for his kind; it was incredible that a child should be poor, unselfish, loving, and *not* deficient in intellect!” (32). But there is *nothing* wrong with Gibbie’s mind. As the book progresses, and the reader and the other characters become more familiar with Gibbie, a different picture emerges. Even in the beginning, he has remarkable understanding of the city, and he has a “knowledge of human nature, human need, human aims, human relations in the business of life, such as hardly another can possess” (7). He learns to read very quickly, once someone decides to try to teach him (161), and he essentially teaches himself how to put words together in writing, using sound as his guide. For example, reading from an old Bible, he puts together “Galatians” and “breath” to form the sounds of his surname, Galbraith (163-64). He goes on to inherit some money, receive a university education, and take up management of his extensive property. Through it all, Gibbie maintains his inherent goodness and increases in faith. As the book progresses, it is only those characters who are not themselves in touch with eternal truths who continue to see him as an “idiot.” Judged by people capable of judging truthfully, Gibbie’s intelligence is unquestioned. Through both *Diamond* and *Gibbie*, MacDonald challenges the pre-conceptions of his audience, asking them to look beyond their usual ways of seeing things and open themselves to other possibilities; at the same time, he demonstrates lives lived with an understanding of a wider reality.

MacDonald also presents a number of characters with physical disabilities. It is a standard trope in literature that characters with some kind of physical impairment are frequently blessed in other ways. Gibbie is probably the best example of this trend in MacDonald's oeuvre. MacDonald ponders Gibbie's muteness:

I wonder how much Gibbie was indebted to his constrained silence during all these years. That he lost by it, no one will doubt; that he gained also, a few will admit: though I should find it hard to say what and how great, I cannot doubt it bore an important part in the fostering of such thoughts and feelings and actions as were beyond the vision of Donal, poet as he was growing to be. (168)

Gibbie's inability to speak has helped him develop his view of reality. However, he is by no means the only example. The Polwarths in *Thomas Wingfold* and *Paul Faber* experience great physical discomfort, but this leads to deeper spiritual insight.⁵⁶ Several of MacDonald's books also feature characters who are blind. These characters do not all possess Gibbie's moral near-perfection, but MacDonald does suggest that the loss of eyesight leads to deeper spiritual insight, which leads, in turn, to a truer understanding of reality.

The best example of this is found in *Alec Forbes of Howglen* (1864), where one of the key relationships is between the heroine, Annie Anderson, and Tibbie Dyster. Blinded by smallpox when she was two years old (198), Tibbie has no recollection of ever having been able to see. However, Tibbie possesses an awareness that goes far beyond the other characters in the novel. This awareness includes both heightened other senses like smell and hearing (198) and what is almost an extra sense. She turns her face in the direction of a sunbeam on a wall (163) and she knows that Annie is waiting to speak to her, even though

⁵⁶ See Chapter Three for more about these characters.

they have never met (164). This special sight is spiritual in nature, and as a result of it, Tibbie lives in a state of spiritual communion with God that far surpasses that of the other characters.⁵⁷ Among other things, Tibbie insists that she understands the idea of “light” better than most people who know light primarily through their eyes. She explains, “the sicht without the een is better nor the sicht o’ the een. Fowk nae doobt has baith; but I think whiles ‘at the Lord gives a grainy mair o’ the inside licht to mak’ up for the loss o’ the outside, and well I wat it doesna want muckle to do that” (194-95). Tibbie clearly privileges the inner light, the light emanating directly from Christ, over any kind of outer light; in fact, she implies that the outer light can actually be a hindrance to fully understanding and appreciating the inner.⁵⁸

Duncan MacPhail receives similar treatment in *Malcolm*. He has an instinctive ability to sense “the neighbourhood of material objects” (27), to know the level of the tide, and to be able to tell “whether a woman who spoke to him had a child in her arms or not; and, indeed, was believed to know sooner than ordinary mortals that one was about to become a mother” (28). Though blind in the human sense, Duncan can “see” things that others cannot. He is connected to a different level of reality. Though MacDonald knows his readers cannot emulate Duncan’s blindness, he nonetheless sets him up as an ideal character. Duncan makes his money by cleaning the lamps of the townspeople; this job allows MacDonald to illustrate his point about true sight:

It was strange and touching to see the sightless man thus busy about light for others. A marvellous symbol of faith he was not only believing in sight, but in the mysterious, and to him altogether unintelligible means by which others saw! In thus lending his aid to a faculty in which he had no share, he himself

⁵⁷ This may relate to MacDonald’s belief in the Second Sight, which was discussed in Chapter Three.

⁵⁸ Portions of this paragraph have been adapted from my paper “‘The Sicht Without the Een is Better nor the Sicht o’ the Een’: Spiritual and Physical Sight in MacDonald’s *Alec Forbes of Howglen*,” which was presented at the C.S. Lewis and the Inklings Society Conference at Grove City College, April 4-5, 2008.

followed the trail of the garments of Light, stooping ever and anon to lift and bear her skirts. He haunted the steps of the unknown Power, and flitted about the walls of her temple as we mortals haunt the borders of the immortal land, knowing nothing of what lies behind the unseen veil, yet believing in an unrevealed grandeur. (78)

Just as he did with Tibbie, MacDonald connects the idea of inner and outer sight. In this case, MacDonald says that spiritually, everyone should be as Duncan is. Duncan “haunt[s] the steps” of the Light that he knows exists beyond his experience; MacDonald reminds his readers that there is a realm of existence beyond this one as well. Through these depictions of blindness, MacDonald encourages his readers to reconsider what it means to “see,” to expand their horizons to include, spiritually if not physically, the larger reality of which God is the center.

Not everyone has blindness or muteness to help them come to a deeper understanding of reality, however. MacDonald’s novels also include a number of characters who come to this understanding through a conscious desire and choice to explore and understand it. These characters appear in all of his non-fantasies, and in many of his fantasies, albeit in different form. The MacDonald Hero (or Heroine), as named by Reis, falls into this category, but relatively few of MacDonald’s protagonists are actually MacDonald Heroes, at least at the beginning of their story. Those who are, are generally characters who face their crises early, such as Cosmo Warlock (*Castle Warlock*), Donal Grant (whose crisis comes at the end of *Sir Gibbie*), Walton (*Annals of a Quiet Neighbourhood*), Robert Falconer, Sir Gibbie, and Mary Marston. Instead, many of these characters are older, working class men who advise and mentor the protagonist and help him/her to find the right path: David Elginbrod, Andrew Comin (*Donal Grant*), Peter Simon (*Castle Warlock*), Alexander Graham (*Malcolm* and *The Marquis of Lossie*), Old Rogers

(*Annals*), Mr. Fuller (*Guild Court*), MacLear (*Salted with Fire*), etc. Hein has identified these characters as “sage figures” who “offer moral and spiritual instruction that enables the seeker to find himself and to embark on the road to spiritual development” (*Harmony Within* 122). Hein also notes a male/female dichotomy between the non-fantasies and the fantasies (122), and while he is correct to an extent, there are exceptions. Mr. Raven/Adam in *Lilith* serves as a mentor for Vane. Likewise, Marion Clare serves as a mentor for Wynnie Percivale in *The Vicar’s Daughter*.

It is difficult to discuss these positive characters as a unit; as MacDonald’s critics have pointed out, these tend to be his best and most real (and consequently, the most individualized) characters. Nonetheless, certain shared characteristics can be identified among these individuals, characteristics that are part of living in a right relationship to reality. Firstly, these characters recognize that reality is bigger than it seems, and they desire to know more about it. They are open to the possibilities and curious about them. Like Cosmo, when he mourns the loss of the mystery surrounding the creek (*Castle Warlock* 5-6), these characters view the idea of a world without mystery as undesirable. When Donal Grant discovers the perfectly natural source of the ghost music, his reaction, like Cosmo’s, is one of disappointment. Though he recognizes that the truth should be known, he also admits that “[t]hings that cannot be explained so widen the horizon around us! open to us fresh regions for question and answer, for possibility and delight! They are so many kernels of knowledge closed in the hard nuts of seeming contradiction” (*Donal Grant* 245). Earlier in the book, he had discussed the possibility of the existence of ghosts, noting that he has no personal experience with them, but that “because I can come into no communication with such a world as may be about me, I therefore imagine it. If, as often as I walked abroad at night, I met and held converse with the disembodied, I should use my imagination little, but make many notes of fact” (99). Donal recognizes that the purpose of

his imagination is to explore the realm of the unknown. Facts are important and should be noted, but the mere idea of things that are unknown can stimulate one into “some high-flying region” (99) of speculation and imagination.

It is important to note that MacDonald does not merely apply this to the marvelous and supernatural. The desire to better understand the world around them does lead MacDonald’s characters to explore the supernatural, but it also drives them to explore and expand what is known of the natural. Understanding reality does not simply mean accepting that there is more than can be seen; it means accepting and understanding what can be seen as well. MacDonald did not see science as the enemy. He has been accused of being “in large part hostile to science” (Manlove, “MacDonald and Kingsley” 147), but as his writings repeatedly show, he was not opposed to science, but to the idea that science, alone, provides answers. Science, rightly applied, helps us better understand reality and its multi-faceted nature. Lord Herbert in *St. George and St. Michael* (1876) is an excellent example of this. Many people believe Herbert is a wizard, but in actual fact, he is much more a scientist and inventor, ahead of his time, than anything supernatural.⁵⁹ He is a mechanical genius, designing and building a wide variety of useful devices. Herbert views it as his task to make the unseen seen:

How few know . . . what a joy lies in making things obey thoughts! In
calling out of the mind, as from the vasty deep,⁶⁰ and setting in visible
presence before the bodily eye that which till then had neither local
habitation nor name! Some such marvels I have to show—for marvels I

⁵⁹ In real life, Lord Herbert, Edward Somerset, 2nd Marquis of Worcester, was a notable inventor, responsible for, among many other things, one of the earliest working steam engines. For more about his life and career, see Henry Dircks (1865), *The Life, Times, and Scientific Labours of the Second Marquis of Worcester*. It is likely that MacDonald was familiar with Dircks’s work, which appeared eleven years before MacDonald’s novel and was the first major biography of Somerset (Dircks vii).

⁶⁰The phrase “from the vasty deep” is a reference to Shakespeare’s *Henry IV, Part I*, III.i.52. As part of his claim to supernatural and extraordinary abilities, Glendower boasts of his ability to “call spirits from the vasty deep” to Hotspur, who belittles and dismisses those claims.

must call them, even though it is my voice they have obeyed to come; and I never lose sight of the marvel. (119-20)

His desire to see into the “vasty deep” makes Herbert a better scientist. It also keeps him humble in the face of ultimate reality. He is able to bring hidden things, in the form of ideas and inventions both, into the visible world, but he never loses sight of the fact that the invisible still contains marvels he cannot understand. Everything that Herbert does works to deepen his understanding of reality—what is, what can be, and what might someday become possible. Yet, for all that he discovers, he understands that he will never come to the end of it. Reality is limitless. Both Donal and Herbert know this; they seek to understand what they can, but happily embrace that which they cannot, recognizing the deeper reality the unknown represents.

This deeper reality ultimately leads back to God. It is one thing to accept that reality is larger than it seems; it is another to fully embrace that a loving God exists at the heart of that reality. For MacDonald’s “good” characters, God’s presence is unquestioned. He is the lens through which they view the world around them. Consequently, when they look into the mysteries of reality, they are consciously “inquir[ing] into what God has made” (“The Imagination” 2) for the purpose of growing into a deeper relationship with their Creator. This forms the basis of the central character of the children’s novel *Gutta Percha Willie: The Working Genius* (1873), Willie Macmichael. Like Donal and Herbert, Willie wants to understand the world around him. He is curious. He wants to learn new things; he wants to understand and is willing to take the necessary steps to get there. This is a key ingredient in growth. MacDonald describes, “Those who are growing the right way, the more they understand, the more they wonder; and the more they learn to do, the more they want to do. Willie was a boy of this kind” (210). Indeed, much of the book focuses on what Willie learns and does and how each thing he discovers leads him on to something else. He

learns to make shoes so that he can make a pair for his sister's doll (215-16). This, in turn, leads him to learn how to read, so that he can read to the shoemaker while he works. This leads him to school, where he encounters wood-carving through a friend, which leads to lessons from the carpenter, and so on. Willie's entire nature is shaped by his desire to learn and understand. And MacDonald makes it clear that he is "growing the right way." However, his motivation is not simply knowledge for his own sake. Everything he learns, he puts to use to help others. He makes shoes for his sister. He learns to read so he can read to the shoemaker. He is driven on by a desire to be a part of "the general business of the universe" (338), which is explained as the means through which God, giving each individual his or her own work to do, sees that things are done. The example Willie is given is of the shoemaker, who says that his shoemaking is "the way [God] looks after people's feet" (224). Willie's curiosity is not fueled by a desire to know, but a desire to see the world through God's eyes and to be a part of God's work.

Ultimately, this striving to see the world through God's eyes can bring one into conflict with widely accepted, but commonplace or misguided, attitudes. This group of MacDonald's characters is not afraid of this conflict. They are willing and able to think for themselves, even if it means challenging established authorities. When Annie is upbraided for being momentarily flippant, she is reminded, "We dinna hear 'at the Saviour himsel' ever sae muckle as smiled." Annie answers, "Well, that wad hae been little wonner, wi' what he had upo' 'm. But I'm nae sure that he didna, for a' that. Fowk disna aye tell whan a body lauchs" (*Alec Forbes* 310). Annie has a deep respect for authority (103), but she is not afraid to think for herself, even if it means disagreeing with an authority. MacDonald's books frequently present characters who disagree with authority, particularly authorities within the organized church or the supposed authority of "society." David Elginbrod protests against the Sunday sermon (42-43). Andrew Comin, in *Donal Grant*, objects to the

“lees and lees agen my Lord an’ my God” that he generally hears at church (32). Donal himself argues with a clergyman who calls Percy Shelley “an infidel” and disputes with him about the doctrine of atonement (10-12). As shown above, Mary Marston walks her own way, even in the face of society’s disapproval. *St. George and St. Michael*, which takes place during the English Civil War of the 1640s, is all about how the central characters face questions of conscience relating to the role of church and state authority; what eventually brings the two central characters together is that they remain obedient to their individual consciences; though this initially drives them apart, it also allows for them to come back together (242).

However, it must be stressed that these characters do not challenge authority for the sake of challenging authority. They do not go against the standard way of viewing the world just to be different. They do so because those figures in authority, whether they are in the Church or in society, refuse to see things through the lens of true reality. Consequently, those characters who do see life through the lens of true reality see things differently. *Robert Falconer* may be the strongest example of this. Living amongst people to whom “every kind of music, except the most unmusical of psalm singing, was in their minds of a piece with ‘dancin’ an’ play-actin’, an’ ither worldly vanities an’ abominations” (119), Robert nonetheless clandestinely acquires (66) and learns to play the violin, because he disagrees with their assessment of music. When his grandmother finds out and destroys the violin (187), Robert begins to take piano lessons from his neighbor (196). Robert thinks for himself in matters of theology as well. He expresses his disagreement with some of the harsher doctrines of Scottish Calvinism several times throughout the book. In one place, he even posits his own “plan of salvation,” which has his grandmother fearing for Robert’s soul (96-109) (though his plan is very similar to MacDonald’s own theology). He carries this independence of thought with him into adulthood, when in the course of his work

amongst the poor in London he does things his own way, eschewing and contradicting society's "wisdom" about the best ways to help (482-91). Being willing to think for himself in the face of society and the church allows Robert to accomplish much more than he would otherwise have done. This willingness is shared by many of MacDonald's exemplary characters, and it is a fundamental part of living a life in touch with true reality.

Finally, what all of these characteristics add up to is a life that is absolutely God-centered. Without an orientation that ultimately points to God, all of these characteristics could easily become corrupted. MacDonald describes this type of faith as "childlike." In his *Unspoken Sermon*, "The Child in the Midst," MacDonald describes childlikeness as the possession of humility (6), an absence of ambition (6), obedience (13), and a willingness to serve (13). Walton explains that "[t]he one thing is, whether we are letting God have His own way with us, following where He leads, learning the lessons He gives us" (*Annals of a Quiet Neighbourhood* 489-90). For each of MacDonald's exemplary characters, an absolute faith is an integral part of who they are. For these characters, every part of themselves is directed towards God. Every one of MacDonald's non-fantasies contains at least one character who embodies this kind of God-directed healthy imagination. These characters are impossible to classify according to traditional hero/heroine/villain categories. Some are heroes. Some are heroines. Others are supporting characters met along the way. They are teachers and tradesmen, doctors and clergymen, artists and laborers. They are mothers and fathers, husbands and wives. They are English and Scottish; they are Presbyterians, Anglicans, Dissenters, and even in a few cases, Catholics. They are rich and they are poor; they live in the country and the city. They are individuals, with unique interests and desires. What unites them across MacDonald's oeuvre is not that they conform to any standard character type, but rather that they each possess an understanding that true reality differs from commonplace, everyday reality, that perceiving true reality means seeing (or at least

trying to see) the world as God sees it and putting God in his rightful place at the center of that reality. That these characters recur so often in MacDonald's fiction is not a flaw or a mistake. It is an intentional part of his message. These characters present MacDonald's readers with examples to emulate. They embody the approach to life that MacDonald wished all his readers to discover.

Conclusion

MacDonald's fiction contains heroes and villains. There are ideal women and sirens. His stories are peopled with artists and working class sages and other types. Ultimately, however, classifying MacDonald's characters merely according to their functions in the plot over-simplifies a large and complex array of individuals. Classifying them according to their sense of reality also reveals recurrent types of people and is an imperfect system, but it looks at the actual nature of the individual, rather than simply at his or her dramatic function. By looking at the array of viewpoints in MacDonald's fiction, it becomes easier to see the unique qualities and faults possessed by the characters. They become less stereotypical and more individualized as the range of manifestations grows increasingly wide. For MacDonald, reality was more than commonplace, everyday life. Reality is a vast expanse, containing many things that cannot be understood with the senses, that cannot be ascertained by facts. True reality is so much more. And at the heart of that true reality is God, loving and active in the lives of his creation. By showing how different understandings of reality affect the people who have them, MacDonald showed his readers both how low they could sink and how high they could rise. He gave them examples to emulate and examples to avoid. His characters were not merely vehicles to carry the plot, or even to carry the message. They are themselves a fundamental part of the message MacDonald wished to convey. They do not contribute to the failure of his novels; rather they demonstrate how successfully he used the elements of fiction to bring his beliefs to

life.

Chapter Five

MacDonald's Storytelling Techniques

Introduction

MacDonald's desire to teach his readers to perceive that true reality is larger than what is generally believed, to open themselves to a sense of the marvelous, affects every aspect of his fiction. His plots are full of reality-challenging and reality-expanding incidents designed to open his readers' imaginations. His characterization frequently centers on how open his characters are to that enlarged sense of reality. In addition to the events and characters making up his stories, the *way* MacDonald tells his stories reflects this desire. His books feature direct discussion about the nature of reality, both among the characters and from the narrators directly. His interpolated tales push the walls of the novels' reality further and further outward. Even his use of language works on his readers' imaginations to produce a sense of wonder, a sense that there is, simply, more out there than is readily discernible. Nor are these techniques found only in the non-fantasies. Related techniques, both in language and in story-telling structure, can be found throughout the fantasies, as well. Though frequently written off as overly preachy, MacDonald's storytelling techniques play an integral role in his attempts to marvelize the world and to teach his readers to see beyond commonplace reality.

MacDonald's Technique, According to his Critics

As with his plots and his characters, MacDonald's techniques have come under much fire from critics. C. S. Lewis (1946) may be the harshest of MacDonald's critics when it comes to looking at MacDonald's actual writing. He writes:

If we define Literature as an art whose medium is words, then certainly, MacDonald has no place in its first rank—perhaps not even in its second The texture of his writing as a whole is undistinguished, at times fumbling.

Bad pulpit traditions cling to it; there is sometimes a nonconformist
 verbosity, sometimes an old Scotch weakness for florid ornament . . .
 sometimes an oversweetness picked up from Novalis. (xxviii-xxix)

Though Lewis goes on to praise MacDonald's myth-making abilities, calling him "the greatest genius of this kind whom I know" (xxx), he clarifies that "[t]o call it literary genius seems unsatisfactory since it can coexist with great inferiority in the art of words—nay, since its connection with words at all turns out to be merely external and, in a sense, accidental" (xxxi). As discussed in Chapter Two, Lewis is frequently praised for saving MacDonald's reputation from total obscurity in the twentieth century, and this praise is not without merit. Lewis's endorsement of MacDonald's fantasies remains a key reason that many people read and remember MacDonald (Durie 163). Nonetheless, Lewis's criticism of MacDonald as a wordsmith did not spare his fantasies. When he was talking about "inferiority in the art of words" and the "accidental" quality of language, Lewis was talking about MacDonald's fantasies. Lewis liked MacDonald's ideas and his stories; he did not care for the way in which those stories were told.

Other critics have been more forgiving. Even Reis (1972), who has been so harsh towards other aspects of MacDonald's writing, takes a slightly friendlier stance towards MacDonald's techniques. He does, indeed, note that MacDonald's writing "is conventional, proper, optimistic, didactic, sentimental, verbose" (*George MacDonald* 52), but he also goes on to acknowledge that "[m]ost of these are the very attributes of Victorian fiction which the twentieth century is fondest of deploring" (52). He also heavily criticizes particular aspects of MacDonald's style which he claims:

act in MacDonald's novels to make them decidedly unpalatable to the
 twentieth-century cosmopolitan reader of English literature. First of all, of
 course, MacDonald's dialogue is often in lowland Scots dialect, which few

now understand, especially in the United States. Secondly, MacDonald's experience as a minister before he became a novelist rather infected his prose with pulpit, as distinguished from fictional, stylistic traditions. (53)

Still, he acknowledges that "[t]his is not to say that he *always* writes this way in his novels, for often his language is easy and fluent, and sometimes it is powerful; but that makes the lapses all the more glaring and dissonant" (55). This is, admittedly, faint praise, but Reis does clearly indicate that MacDonald's writing is "often" free from the flaws on which Reis tends to focus.

Indeed, many of MacDonald's critics acknowledge that MacDonald's stylistic flaws are recurrent, but intermittent. Nonetheless, the flaws get most of the attention. Over and over again, the critical refrain becomes that MacDonald's emphasis on his message outweighs artistic integrity. Kerry Dearborn (2006) notes that "MacDonald did not want to sacrifice artistic quality, but his commitment to truth was primary" (4). Her comment suggests that, though he may not have wanted to, he *did* "sacrifice artistic quality" at times. Similarly, Rolland Hein (1982) claims that "MacDonald was first of all a Christian; secondly, an artist" (*Harmony Within* 113). Hein ultimately concludes that "It is undeniable that MacDonald did possess the gift of telling a story with verve and intrigue, and portions of his work are artistically admirable. However, both his haste and his fatigue are too often evident" (116). William Raeper (1987) claims that MacDonald's "prose is like syrup, affected and Latinate, full of pulpit oratory. Many of the novels were written as though delivered straight from the pulpit" (*George MacDonald* 195). Carole Silver (2002) refers to "his sometimes tedious and prolix prose style" (354). Jamie Rankin (1989) writes that "MacDonald preaches freely in the Scotch novels" (63). This litany could continue.

David Robb (1987) offers a general summary of the attitude of MacDonald critics when he writes that MacDonald's "failure in these matters is normally ascribed either to

incompetence or to a willful (or financially enforced) refusal to stick to the unrealistic, fantasy forms which seem most in accord with his idealistic vision” (*God’s Fiction* 25). However, Robb disagrees with this conclusion. He writes, “They are what they are, not (I believe) because of incompetence or because MacDonald did not really want to write them. Instead, they are to be seen as MacDonald’s most ambitious, if flawed, attempts to articulate his vision in all its full meaning” (*God’s Fiction* 25). Of MacDonald’s narrative voice, Robb argues:

MacDonald’s presence in his own works is not achieved merely through passages of direct address to the reader When such passages do occur, however, they obtrude less than might have been expected, because even the standard narrative is written in a style steeped in personality. The speaking-voice which MacDonald chooses for his narration modulates easily and frequently into a style compounded of the poetic and the rhetorical: it is a forceful and (once adjusted to) surprisingly readable combination we are driven to the conclusion that a large part of whatever appeal they may have is the appeal of contact with MacDonald himself. Although modern taste in fiction does not readily approve of novels being used as vehicles for the overt and unironic presentation of an author’s views and personality, MacDonald was writing in an age with no such scruples (*God’s Fiction* 39-40).

MacDonald’s prose may not conform to modern standards of excellence, but as Robb explains, this does not mean it fails. The prose is an extension of the man, growing naturally out of MacDonald’s personality, purpose, and beliefs.

Robb stops short of denying the impression of these works as “the worst kind of shapeless, self-indulgent Victorian fictional excess,” claiming that “only a sympathetic

reading can” ultimately remove such an impression (*God’s Fiction* 42). Nonetheless, he disagrees with Lewis’s assertion that “MacDonald’s genius is such that ‘its connection with words at all turns out to be merely external and, in a sense, accidental’. In fact, this is never true of MacDonald at his best” (*God’s Fiction* 86). Robb singles out *Phantastes*, claiming that the novel “rewards in corresponding measure however much attention we pay to the details of verbal expression and formal structuring” (86-87). In fact, Robb’s assertion is not only true of *Phantastes*, but of most of MacDonald’s fiction. Despite the characteristics that cause his fiction to be dismissed as inferior, and at times because of those same characteristics, MacDonald’s literary technique is bound up with the message he sought to convey. A closer look at MacDonald’s fiction clearly reveals that, in addition to the plots and characters, his storytelling techniques, including his narration, his story structure, and his use of language, all contribute to giving his readers the impression of a larger reality with God at its center.

Direct Discussion of the Nature of Reality

The ideas that seem to matter the most to MacDonald frequently appear in his fiction in the form of direct discussion, both between characters and from the narrator to the audience. Probably more than anything else, this technique has contributed to the impression of MacDonald’s “preachiness,” and it is a key factor contributing to the negative view of MacDonald’s non-fantasy fiction. However, this technique needs to be considered in context. As noted above, Robb has argued that “MacDonald was writing in an age with no such scruples” about an author using his fiction to convey a message (*God’s Fiction* 40). The novels of Charles Dickens, for example, have long been held up as novels of social reform. Other novelists during the period used their novels as platforms for religious and social ideas. Deirdre David (2001) notes that the Victorian novel “is about so many things; provincial politics, ecclesiastical infighting, city squalor, repressed sexuality, making

money, losing money, imperial adventure, angels in the house, frightening New Women, scientific challenges to established religious beliefs, the value and function of the aesthetic life in a materialistic society (to name a few)” (5). John Kucich (2001) suggests that while “The Victorian novel was predominantly a novel of domestic manners, not a novel of ideas,” in reality, “intellectual debates informed so many aspects of Victorian fiction so powerfully that it would not be inaccurate to say that those debates governed both the form and the substance of the genre” (212). MacDonald was certainly not alone in filling his books with his beliefs and ideas, and as Raeper notes, “MacDonald was taken *seriously* as a popular novelist. His difficult prose style was accepted without murmur” (“Introduction” 6). In another place, Raeper even goes so far as to say that, though “such digressions do not make for good novel writing,” MacDonald’s “audience was probably as happy with the asides as anything else, for they are often kernels of MacDonald’s thought expressed concisely in an aphoristic manner” (*George MacDonald* 195). Sadler (1994) writes that “some of MacDonald’s best writing occurs when he allows his own convictions and visions to take over what he is writing. It is George MacDonald’s special, distinctive vision of life that continues to fascinate so many of his readers” (xiii). MacDonald’s readers would not have necessarily thought that MacDonald’s direct discussions of important ideas made his novels bad.

Furthermore, George MacDonald knew his audience. He generally had an idea of who he was writing for and what that audience would expect. Jan Susina has examined three different versions of MacDonald’s “The Light Princess,” looking at the specific ways in which MacDonald shaped each version for his intended audience (99-112). Others of MacDonald’s works show similar shaping for specific audiences. Hein singles out the “Marshmallows Trilogy” of *Annals of a Quiet Neighbourhood* (1867), *The Seaboard Parish* (1868), and *The Vicar’s Daughter* (1872) as being “among MacDonald’s poorest, lapsing as

they do into long sermons illustrated by events that too often challenge one's sense of reality" (*Harmony Within* 122-23). However, Hein acknowledges that MacDonald's sermonizing is "capable of large appeal to those who appreciate this species of writing. But they simply act as a weight upon much of his fiction, even to the extent of obscuring the moral insights that would otherwise be manifest to a larger group of readers today" (*Harmony Within* xiii). What Hein fails to note is that these books were written for people who *did* "appreciate this species of writing." The trilogy first appeared in the *Sunday Magazine* (Shattock 1333-38). They "were therefore written for an audience who felt the need to be improved on the Sabbath" (Raeper, *George MacDonald* 194). These novels would not have been viewed by MacDonald or his intended audience as "among [his] poorest" because they provide what the audience was expecting. On the contrary, Hein himself acknowledges that many of MacDonald's readers viewed *Annals* as among his best (*Harmony Within* 123).⁶¹ MacDonald knew his audience's expectations.

When he violates those expectations, as he not infrequently does, critics are wrong to assume automatically that it is a failure on MacDonald's part (Robb, "Realism and Fantasy" 279). As Robb points out, "MacDonald was writing novels on his own terms" ("Scottish Novels" 14). MacDonald did not intend his novels to be simply entertaining; he intended them to be instructive. Hein is absolutely correct when he accuses MacDonald of "challeng[ing] one's sense of reality" (*Harmony Within* 123). He is incorrect when he assumes that this is a mistake. MacDonald wanted to challenge his readers' sense of reality; he wanted them to recognize that reality is not as prescribed and commonplace as many people thought. Authorial asides and direct discussions are among the methods he used to achieve his purpose.

⁶¹ Hein seems truly perplexed by this fact. He goes on to say that "More curious yet is the statement of Ronald [MacDonald's son], whose literary sensibilities appear to be reasonably sharp, that this novel ranks above all his father's other English novels and with the best of the Scottish" (123). These books may not appeal to Hein's literary sensibilities, but MacDonald was writing with a different audience in mind, and they were apparently quite happy with what he was doing.

Character Discussion about the Nature of Reality

MacDonald's most common themes frequently become topics of conversation among his characters. The nature of reality is no exception. Characters frequently have conversations about life and the world around them, including those parts of the world that are not readily discernable. *David Elginbrod's* (1864) Hugh Sutherland and Robert Falconer discuss the possibility that crystals might allow access to the invisible world (358-61). In *Alec Forbes* (1864), Tibbie Dyster and Annie Anderson have frequent conversations on the nature of light and blindness. Donal Grant believes in an existence beyond the visible; he discusses Brownies with Jean Mavor (*Sir Gibbie* 112-114) and ghosts with Kate Graeme (*Donal Grant* 98-101). Mattie and Lucy talk about the role of flowers in the great scheme of the universe (*Guild Court* 202-05). Clare Skymer and the narrator examine the question of whether or not heaven will include animals (*A Rough Shaking* 23-24). *Paul Faber* contains numerous debates between committed atheist Faber and committed Christian Wingfold about the existence of God. Conversations of this kind occur in most of MacDonald's fiction and contribute to MacDonald's questioning of the boundaries of reality.

This kind of conversation occurs in the fantasies as well as the non-fantasies. In *Phantastes* (1858), Anodos finds himself at a farmhouse on the morning after his terrifying encounter with the Alder-maiden. While there, he and the farmer discuss their surroundings. The farmer insists that there is nothing supernatural about the forest. The farmer says, "Now, you would hardly credit it, but my wife believes every fairy-tale that ever was written. I cannot account for it. She is a most sensible woman in everything else" (93-94.) Hearing this, Anodos asks, "But should not that make you treat her belief with something of respect, though you cannot share in it yourself?" (94). The farmer insists that it is impossible (94). The farmer does not believe in Fairyland, though he lives there. He

has closed his mind to the possibility of believing anything beyond the ordinary. He persists in his disbelief even though it means essentially calling his wife a liar, despite the fact that he knows her not to be. His desire to limit reality to what he can understand causes him to perform a great injustice. Interestingly, it is not his inability to believe that Anodos criticizes; it is his refusal to grant even the possibility. MacDonald uses this conversation to remind his readers of the importance of keeping an open mind, of being willing to see beyond the mundane, even if it seems impossible.

Among the non-fantasies, *Thomas Wingfold* provides some of the clearest examples of MacDonald's use of this technique. Two major strands of the novel involve Wingfold's quest for faith and George Bascombe's attempts to convince Helen of the futility of belief in any kind of afterlife. Bascombe staunchly asserts a profoundly materialistic view of the universe, disavowing anything remotely supernatural and fully intending to "destroy the beliefs of everybody else" (31). The novel contains many of his attempts at persuasion (37-40, and elsewhere). On the other side, Wingfold is guided by Joseph Polwarth, who earnestly believes in God and sees His hand all around him. On at least one occasion, MacDonald sets up a conversation between these two men (and Mr. Drew the draper) in direct opposition to the conversations held by Bascombe and Helen. He does not mention Bascombe by name, but he writes:

It is not often in real life that such conversations occur. Generally, in any talk worth calling conversation, every man has some point to maintain, and his object is to justify his own thesis and disprove his neighbour's In the present case, unusual as it is for so many as three truth-loving men to come thus together on the face of this planet, here were three simply set on uttering truth they had seen, and gaining sight of truth as yet veiled from them. (290)

Whereas nearly everything that Bascombe says is intended to "disprove his neighbour's"

beliefs, Polwarth, Wingfold, and Drew are simply discussing reality as they understand it. On this occasion, they are discussing “divine service,” disagreeing with the usual application of that term to church attendance (291), and applying it in the wider context of daily life, in particular to business ventures and the accumulation of wealth (290-95). When Drew suggests that Polwarth “spoke of a purely ideal state—one that could not be realised in this world” (294), Polwarth responds:

Purely ideal or not, one thing is certain: it will never be reached by one who is so indifferent to it as to believe it impossible. Whether it may be reached in this world or not, that is a question of *no* consequence; whether a man has begun to *reach after* it is of the utmost awfulness of import. And should it be ideal, which I doubt, what else than the ideal have the followers of the ideal man to do with? (294)

Numerous such conversations can be found throughout the novel, with characters debating and discussing the nature of reality and the proper attitude one should take towards it.

Similarly, in *Robert Falconer*, Robert Falconer and Archie Gordon have several conversations about viewing reality through this proper perspective. Frequently these conversations occur in relation to Falconer’s work among the poor in London. The third volume is full of such passages.⁶² A couple of examples will be sufficient to illustrate the pattern. Gordon bemoans the vice and squalor in which many people live, especially the women, but Falconer reminds him that “They are in God’s hands He hasn’t done making them yet. Shall it take less time to make a woman than to make a world? Is not the woman the greater? She may have her ages of chaos, her centuries of crawling slime, yet rise a woman at last” (459). Significantly, Falconer’s answer looks beyond the immediate

⁶² At least one critic has objected to the novel’s third volume. Peter Butter (1995) views the third volume as significantly inferior to the first two, largely because of these conversations. He writes, “[Robert] has a confidant to explain his ideas to, and these are interesting; but they are not realized in fictional terms through incidents, living characters, relationships. The stories seem contrived to illustrate a thesis” (63). However, it seems clear that MacDonald had a different purpose in mind. He used these conversations intentionally.

earthly context which is all Gordon can see. Falconer reminds his friend that God is bigger, and that only God can see the full picture of reality.⁶³ In another conversation, Gordon expresses his “doubt whether there be a God in heaven.” Falconer answers: “That is only because he is down here . . . taking such good care of us that you can’t see him. There is not a gin-palace, or yet lower hell in London, in which a man or woman can be out of God. The whole being love, there is nothing for you to set against and judge it by. So you are driven to fancies” (464). Again, MacDonald uses his characters’ conversations to remind his readers that reality is not as it seems. He reminds them that, however it might seem, there is a loving God at the center of everything, and it is through that perspective that they should view the world around them.

Conversations of this kind occur throughout the non-fantasies spanning the central decades of MacDonald’s career. Similar conversations take place in the fantasies. In addition to the earlier quoted passage from *Phantastes*, *The Princess and the Goblin* (1872) features conversations between the Great-Great-Grandmother and Princess Irene about why other characters don’t believe that the Great-Great-Grandmother exists (115, 227). *The Princess and Curdie* (1882) features conversations between the Great-Great-Grandmother and Curdie about appearance and perception (42-46, 96-102). *At the Back of the North Wind* (1871) includes several conversations between Diamond and other characters who think he’s an “idiot” because of the way he talks about his experiences (166, 187). In *Lilith* (1897), this type of conversation goes even further. A significant portion of the novel consists of conversations between Vane and Mr. Raven, in which Raven attempts to explain to Vane where he is. When Vane first asks how he got there, Raven tells him he “came through the door” (17). Vane insists that he did not, that he “never saw any door” (18). Raven responds by telling him ““Of course not! . . . all the doors you had yet seen—and you

⁶³ MacDonald’s decision to cast this in evolutionary terms is equally significant, as it draws on contemporary scientific theories of an old and ever-changing earth, theories which caused many Victorians to question long-standing assumptions about reality and their place in it. This chapter will look at this more later on.

haven't seen many—were doors in; here you came upon a door out! The strange thing to you,' he went on thoughtfully, 'will be, that the more doors you go out of, the farther you get in!'" (19). This statement defies traditional logic and confuses Vane (and probably the reader). Later, they have this exchange:

"What right have you to treat me so, Mr. Raven?" I said with deep offence. Am I, or am I not, a free agent?"

"A man is as free as he chooses to make himself, never an atom freer," answered the raven.

"You have no right to make me do things against my will!"

"When you have a will, you will find that no one can."

"You wrong me in the very essence of my individuality!" I persisted.

"If you were an individual I could not, therefore now I do not. You are but beginning to become an individual. (30)

Vane speaks with the wisdom of this world, which is limited by its ignorance of the other world into which Vane has come. Raven speaks with a wisdom that is not so limited. To Vane, Raven speaks nonsense, but he actually speaks from the viewpoint of the eternal.

This conversation continues like this for quite some time. The effect is that Vane becomes thoroughly confused and disoriented. His entire understanding of reality, his own sense of self, everything he *thinks* he knows, are undermined and challenged by Raven's comments.

In addition to expressing some of MacDonald's views on the nature of reality, Raven's comments simultaneously and systematically dismantle Vane's sense of reality and, with it, the readers' own certainty that things are the way they think they are. Throughout his fiction, MacDonald uses his characters to discuss the nature of reality and to encourage his readers to open themselves up to a larger vision.

Authorial Asides about the Nature of Reality

These asides can be found in nearly all of MacDonald's non-fantasies, as well as in some of his fantasies. A sampling of passages from a few works will illustrate the overall pattern. In *Annals of a Quiet Neighbourhood* (1867), the narrator Walton ponders "the strange elements that not only combine to make life, but must be combined in our idea of life, before we can form a true theory about it" (91). He goes on to theorize:

I doubt whether there is a single history—if one could only get at the whole of it—in which there is not a considerable admixture of the unlikely become fact, including a few strange coincidences; of the uncommon, which, although striking at first, has grown common from familiarity with its presence as our own; with even, at least, some one more or less rosy touch of what we call the romantic. (91-92)

Here, MacDonald's narrator argues that the common perception of reality is too limited. Life involves the strange and uncommon in addition to the commonplace and ordinary. Until people open up and acknowledge this widened definition, they have an incomplete understanding of life.

In *Robert Falconer* (1868), the narrator, Archie Gordon, speculates that "even the new-born infant is, in some of his moods, already grappling with the deepest metaphysical problems, in forms infinitely too rudimental for the understanding of the grown philosopher" (116). The struggle to understand the nature of existence, the nature of reality, is innate to the human condition. Furthermore, by suggesting that an adult, even a philosopher, cannot understand the infant's perspective, MacDonald implies that reality is ultimately more complex than human understanding is capable of comprehending. There is more going on than meets the eye. And there is meaning in the more as well. He writes:

There must be truth in the scent of that pine-wood: some one must mean it.
There must be a glory in those heavens that depends not upon our

imagination: some power greater than they must dwell in them. Some spirit must move in that wind that haunts us with a kind of human sorrow; some soul must look up to us from the eye of that starry flower. It must be something human, else not to us divine. (154)

Ultimately, a right awareness of the largeness of reality should reveal “the greatest need that the human heart possesses—the need of the God-Man” (154). MacDonald uses his authorial asides to tell his readers that reality is wider than they might think and to point them to the God at the true center of reality.

Sometimes, MacDonald’s asides involve commenting on the action of the story, guiding his readers’ interpretation of the events and placing them in the proper context of his larger reality. In *Guild Court* (1868), after Thomas has misplaced his wallet, MacDonald explains that “[t]he best thing that can happen to a man, sometimes, is to lose his money; and, while people are compassionate over the loss, God may regard it as the first step of the stair by which the man shall rise above it and many things besides with which not only his feet, but his hands and his head, are defiled” (255). The idea that suffering is sometimes a blessing in disguise appears frequently in MacDonald’s fiction.⁶⁴ This, again, ties in with his view that the human perception of reality is limited. We see things through our own limited sight; God sees the complete picture. Through recurrent asides such as this one MacDonald reminds his readers that a true understanding of events involves a wider understanding of reality.

Nor are these (relatively) early examples isolated. MacDonald’s tendency to use this type of aside only increased as his career progressed (Robb, *God’s Fiction* 39). *Sir Gibbie* (1879) includes several authorial exhortations to view reality in a true light. In one of the most telling, he starts off defending the seemingly too-perfect character of Sir Gibbie

⁶⁴ For more about this see Kerry Dearborn (2006), *Baptized Imagination*; and Miho Yamaguchi (2007), *George MacDonald’s Challenging Theology*.

and veers off into an attack on his age's attitudes towards life. He acknowledges that someone like Gibbie is "a rarity" (48), but he claims that rareness makes his depiction even more important (48). But, according to MacDonald, this is not what most people want:

the loudest demand of the present day is for the representation of that grade of humanity of which men see the most —that type of things which could never have been but that it might pass. The demand marks the commonness, narrowness, low-levelled satisfaction of the age. It loves its own —not that which might be, and ought to be its own —not its better self, infinitely higher than its present, for the sake of whose approach it exists. (49)

For MacDonald, this desire makes him more determined to accomplish his tasks:

But whatever the demand of the age, I insist that that which ought to be presented to its beholding, is the common good uncommonly developed, and that not because of its rarity, but because it is truer to humanity It is the noble, not the failure from the noble, that is the true human Its improbability, judged by the experience of most men I admit; its unreality in fact I deny; and its absolute unity with the true idea of humanity, I believe and assert. (49-50)

However unusual Gibbie may be, MacDonald insists that he is a truer representation of humanity than a more imperfect character could be. Again, this authorial outburst declares that true reality is different from what many people recognize. Reality, viewed from an eternal perspective with God at its heart, is about the noble, the ideal, the "true idea of humanity." These asides, scattered throughout his oeuvre, are another way MacDonald seeks to remind his readers of this larger reality.

Authorial Asides about the Audience

As this quotation from *Sir Gibbie* shows, MacDonald used his asides not only to

discuss his own views of the nature of reality, but actively to criticize and attempt to correct those of his audience. Timothy Bleeker (1990) has argued that “his approach entails more encouragement than attacks, more exhortation than contentiousness” (9), but a close look at MacDonald’s asides shows that he actually directly attacks his audience’s attitudes frequently. In the midst of the above passage, MacDonald says:

But in our day, a man who will accept any oddity of idiosyncratic development in manners, tastes, or habits, will refuse, not only as improbable, but as inconsistent with human nature, the representation of a man trying to be merely as noble as is absolutely essential to his being—except, indeed, he be at the same time represented as failing utterly in the attempt and compelled to fall back upon the imperfections of humanity, and acknowledge them as its laws. (*Sir Gibbie* 49)

MacDonald not only expresses his own views of the nature of reality, he specifically points out the wrong thinking he sees prevalent in his society. Later in *Sir Gibbie*, he poses the question: “Wherein then is the commonplace man to be blamed? for as he is, so must he think! In this, that he consents to be commonplace, willing to live after his own idea of himself, and not after God’s idea of him—the real idea, which every now and then stirring in him, makes him uneasy with silent rebuke” (337). MacDonald’s purpose is to educate his readers. He sees what he considers wrong and unhealthy thought patterns as rampant in society, and he seeks to correct them by directly stating and challenging the people who hold the ideas, as well as the ideas themselves.

As with the other kinds, this type of aside appears frequently throughout MacDonald’s fiction. MacDonald will frequently address his audience, directly or indirectly, to emphasize a point he wishes to make. These asides take different forms. Sometimes, he will comment on his own writing, as he does frequently in *Guild Court*,

giving his readers a nudge about how they should view the world of his story. In describing his protagonist, Thomas Worboise, MacDonald observes, “Thomas, then, was not stupid, although my reader will see that he was weak enough” (27). In describing a later conversation between Tom and Mary, the daughter of his employer, MacDonald writes “Does my reader ask what they talked about? Nothing worthy of record, I answer” (52). Later, when Thomas falls into disgrace and begins to seek redemption, MacDonald explains:

I flatter myself that my reader is not very much interested in Thomas; I never meant he should be yet. I confess, however, that I am now girding up my loins with the express intention of beginning to interest him if I can. For I have now almost reached the point of his history which I myself feel to verge on the interesting. When a worthless fellow begins to meet with his deserts, then we begin to be aware that after all he is our own flesh and blood (249).

Earlier, he had expressed his distaste with a particular chapter (entitled “A Dreary One”), and his hope that “my reader is not so tired of this chapter as I am. It is bad enough to have to read such uninteresting things—but to have to write them!” (219). These passages are very revealing. They seem to be slightly tongue-in-cheek. Clearly, these characters and incidents are not entirely without interest; if they were, there would not be a novel about them. But at the same time, these passages clearly indicate how MacDonald wants his audience to see his book—through the lens of eternity. What is truly of interest is to look at these characters and events in relation to the true development of the human being—their development in an upward, God-centered direction. These asides remind MacDonald’s readers to use their imaginations to see things properly, to see the events from the viewpoint of a wider reality.

This becomes increasingly clear as the novel progresses. Towards the end, when

Thomas and Lucy are reunited after an indefinite separation, MacDonald discreetly withdraws from the scene. He writes: "To show my reader my confidence in him I leave all that to his imagination, assuring him only that it was all right between them" (352). When they come together again after another separation, MacDonald imagines his readers complaining about his silence on the details of this meeting as well:

But my young reader, who delights in the emotion rather than in the being in love, will grumble at these meditations, and say, "Why don't you go on? Why don't you tell us something more of their meeting?" I answer, "Because I don't choose to tell you more. There are many things, human things too, so sacred that they are better left alone. If you cannot imagine them, you don't deserve to have them described." (373)

Throughout the majority of the book, MacDonald has instructed his readers in how they should view his novel. He has attempted to teach their imaginations to see things through a wider imaginative lens. Now, he encourages them to use their properly-instructed imaginations to fill in the appropriate blanks. These authorial asides are directly involved in accomplishing his overall purpose.

At times, he is even more pointed in his attacks. As reflected in the passages from *Sir Gibbie*, MacDonald recognized that many of his contemporaries chose to cling to their limited viewpoint, refusing to see themselves and their lifestyles from any angle but that of Society. This stubborn refusal, MacDonald argues, is dangerous. In *Mary Marston*, the asides attempt to shake his readers out of their complacency. Towards the end of the novel, the villainess, Sepia, attempts to murder her cousin's husband, Mr. Redmain. Her attempt is thwarted by Mary Marston and Joseph Jasper. MacDonald suggests that Sepia's actions may have been understandable on the grounds of insanity. He writes:

For my own part, until I have seen a man absolutely one with the source

of his being, I do not believe I shall have ever seen a man absolutely sane.

What many would point to as plainest proofs of sanity, I should regard as surest signs of the contrary.

A sign of my own insanity is it?

Your insanity may be worse than mine, for you are aware of none, and I with mine do battle. (331)

Here MacDonald directly addresses his audience and accuses them of insanity because of their God-less view of reality. The root of true sanity is God; without God, insanity ensues. This is a harsh passage, but MacDonald uses this passage and others like it to shock his readers into opening their eyes and seeing the truth. In another passage, again talking about Sepia, he asks:

Was she so very exceptionally bad however? You who hate your brother or your sister—you do not think yourself at all bad! . . . You do not feel wicked? How do you know she did? Besides, you hate, and she did not hate; she only wanted to take care of herself . . . You only hate your brother; you would not, you say, do him any harm; and I believe you would not do him mere bodily harm; but were things changed, so that hate-action became absolutely safe, I should have no confidence what you might not come to do. (333)

Again, this is a harsh passage, and it would have been so to MacDonald's initial readers. To be accused of being as bad as or worse than a murderer because of hate to one's brothers (which MacDonald has throughout defined as the absence of love to one's fellow humans) is astonishing. MacDonald intended to astonish. He intended to shock. His goal in these passages seems to have been to shake his readers free from their close-minded, God-lacking, self-centered view of reality, and to get them to see their actions in a true light.

Again, his asides are an integral component of his purpose for these books. These asides are not here because MacDonald did not know any better than to write this way. On the contrary, these examples show that he knew exactly what he was doing. He uses these asides to very specific purposes—to explain his ideas, to nudge his readers in the right direction, to encourage them to use their imaginations, to shock them out of their complacency. These asides are not accidents. They are intentional, purposeful, and effective.

Interpolated Tales and Stories

Besides the authorial asides that frequently pop up in MacDonald's fiction, he also incorporates a variety of interpolated tales and stories. These deal with action that occurs outside the central narrative. In many cases, these interpolations provide back stories for characters or events involved in the central narrative; others are original tales told by characters to other characters. Both types of stories are used to broaden the world of the novel and the experience of the reader. These stories frequently involve supernatural elements and are not uncommonly used to add a flavor of the marvelous to the larger novel. As with so much else in MacDonald's fiction, they ask the audience to open themselves up to a larger vision of reality. And like so many of MacDonald's techniques, this one has been disparaged by critics. According to Silver, "Such elements as an intrusive authorial voice, the use of digressions and interrupted plots, and the interpolation of tales and parables are perfectly acceptable in postmodern fiction, but they sit uneasily in Victorian novels" (354).⁶⁵ Nonetheless, these "digressions and interrupted plots," along with the "interpolation of tales and parables" are a vital part of MacDonald's strategy.

The most prominent example of this technique is *Adela Cathcart* (1864). Hein has

⁶⁵ Actually, interpolated tales were not at all uncommon in Victorian novels. Lyn Pykett notes that Dickens frequently used interpolated tales (191), and that Walter Scott invented the modern ghost story with an interpolated tale in *Redgauntlet* (196). Interrupted plots were quite common and "perfectly acceptable" in Victorian fiction.

described this as MacDonald's attempt to get his audience to "understand symbolic tales," as opposed to the realist ones he began writing with *David Elginbrod* (Hein 21). This novel centers on a "Story Club," a group of people who gather together at regular intervals and tell stories. This club comes about after Smith (the narrator) observes that Adela, the daughter of a good friend and his honorary niece, is suffering from an unknown illness. She describes waking up one day "with an overpowering sense of blackness and misery" (25). Other characters describe her as "dying of ennui" (376) and in "a kind of moral atrophy" (110). Smith notices that she perks up when told about an incident that happened to the schoolmaster's wife (33-39) and proposes the story club. Much of the novel consists of the stories told by this club, many of which have subsequently been published elsewhere separately. As the novel progresses, and story after story is told, Adela does grow better, and by the end of the novel, she has made a complete recovery.⁶⁶

Adela Cathcart is frequently dismissed by the critics as "merely a ramshackle vehicle to carry all the short stories MacDonald had written prior to that date" (Mellon 26). However, the novel actually demonstrates MacDonald's views on the power of story in a very interesting way. There is the obvious level: Adela recovers largely through her exposure to these stories and the consequent waking up of her imagination. These stories are quite varied in nature. There are actual fairy tales like "The Light Princess," "The Shadows," and "The Giant's Heart," but there are also more realist tales such as "My Uncle Peter" and "The Broken Swords," along with a Gothic horror story in "The Cruel Painter" and an allegory named "The Castle." Each of these stories fulfills the dual role of being entertaining as an individual story and working to further Adela's recovery. However, the novel also includes a few interpolations that are intended solely for the reading audience. Besides the stories told during the club and the one that initially produces the idea for the

⁶⁶ For more about the specific relationship between the order of the stories and Adela's recovery, see Hal Broome (1994), "Dreams, Fairy Tales, and the Curing of Adela Cathcart"; and Nancy Mellon (1996), "The Stages in Adela Cathcart's Cure."

club, the novel also includes other things. Extensive time is spent on the local curate's back-story (157-81), which no one hears except Smith (and the audience). One of the curate's sermons includes a brief parable about a young boy waiting for his mother's return (182-85). Smith translates one of Martin Luther's hymns and includes it in his narration (40-41). He also includes a strange dream (459-62). By including interpolations other than those provided by and for the Story Club, it becomes clear that MacDonald has more than Adela's cure in mind. He wants more than just a "ramshackle vehicle" for existing stories; he seeks to produce an awakening effect in his readers as well. They are not mere spectators to Adela's cure; they are participants in it by experiencing the broadening and deepening of the world brought about by all of these interpolated stories. Unfortunately, as Hein writes, "the experiment was not well received, which evidently made MacDonald determined to keep the two genres more distinctly separate" (21). While it is true that MacDonald never again attempted such an ambitious use of interpolations, it is quite untrue to suggest that he no longer attempted to mix fantasy and reality in his fiction or that he no longer used interpolated tales as a means of mixing them.

Even before attempting to mix the two in *Adela Cathcart*, MacDonald had interpolated tales into *Phantastes*. The two most prominent are located near the novel's exact center.⁶⁷ After traveling through Fairy Land for a while, Anodos has arrived at the Fairy Palace, and discovered its library. After first describing the sensations produced by reading in that library, namely that of entering and becoming a part of whatever text he was reading (140-41), Anodos sets out two specific tales he has discovered. The first comes from a book "with a mystical title" and tells "of a world that is not like ours" (141), where the women have wings instead of arms (146) and babies are found in nature (144), and the people are very curious about how things are done in our world (148-50). The suggestion is

⁶⁷ Both Roderick McGillis (1992) in "The Community of the Centre" and Adrian Gunther (1993) in "The Structure of George MacDonald's *Phantastes*" have written about the significance of the particular placement of these interpolated tales in the center of the novel.

made that people who die in that world are reborn into this one (150, 152). The second tells of a student in Prague, named Cosmo von Wehrstahl, who purchases an enchanted mirror. Every evening, a lady visits the room inside the mirror, and gradually Cosmo falls in love with her (153-87). While interesting in themselves as stories, these two interpolated tales are fascinating when viewed as part of MacDonald's overall narrative strategy. Both stories seek to widen the reader's sphere of reality. The first one opens up the possibility of populated extraterrestrial worlds. The second is set firmly in this world, underscoring the idea that Fairy Land is part of a larger reality which includes this world. It does not possess a completely separate existence, but exists in harmony and relationship with this world. Furthermore, both stories bring in supernatural ideas, in the hinted references to reincarnation in one and the direct references to sorcery and magic in the other. The placement of these stories into an already supernatural adventure deepens and adds complexity to the ideas being transmitted to the readers.

The non-fantasy novels continue this trend.⁶⁸ As the first, *David Elginbrod* contains little in this vein. A brief fable about a flower seed that wants to be a rose, but has to learn contentment as a snowdrop, by accepting its true nature (121-23) is the only significant interpolated story. After *Adela Cathcart*, however, interpolated tales become more prominent. *Robert Falconer* includes a couple of these stories. In one, a witch torments her lover to suicide and, trying to take a ring from his dead hand, gets pulled with him and drowns in the Swalchie whirlpool (off Caithness Scotland) herself (300-01).⁶⁹ In the second, a young man takes refuge with an old woman and her beautiful daughter, only to discover that the daughter turns into a wolf. This story was later published separately as

⁶⁸ Unless otherwise indicated, all of these tales are unique to MacDonald.

⁶⁹ MacDonald's poem "The Dead Hand" (*Poetical Works, Volume II* 123-24) tells the same story. This story also apparently inspired the poem "O Go Not Out" by American Cale Young Rice (1872-1943). Westwood and Kingshill's *The Lore of Scotland* includes a similar tale about the same geographical area; however, it omits the ring, adds another woman and a boat, and ends with the witch still alive under the water to this day (408). It is possible that MacDonald heard the original story and added his own flourishes to it.

“The Grey Wolf.”⁷⁰ *Castle Warlock* also includes a strange story about a wolf, which kills a young woman named Mary. After her death, a woman with the second sight sees Mary’s lover Alister lying on the ground with his head in her lap. When Alister finally kills the wolf, he is mortally wounded himself, but when they find him, and lift his body out of the snow, there is no snow outline of his head, presumably because it has been resting in the lap of the girl (116-20). *Castle Warlock* also includes “The Story of the Knight who Spoke the Truth,” an interpolated tale about a knight incapable of lying and the consequences of his truthfulness (200-04). In *Malcolm*, Malcolm tells a story about a princess living in the castle off the shore who dismissed a suitor in a fit of pique, only to later fall in love with an evil spirit disguised as a man and to be burned alive on the wedding night (248-56). *At the Back of the North Wind* includes “Little Daylight” (258-81). While *At the Back of the North Wind* is considered a fantasy novel, half of the book is actually set in nineteenth century London, and is quite realist in nature. “Little Daylight” appears in this portion, and has no actual connection to the fantasy portions of the book. In *Thomas Wingfold*, Polwarth tells a story about “A Shop in Heaven.” He is clear that it “is no dream,” but rather “something I had thought fairly out before I began” (296). In it, he travels to heaven and observes how the people there go about their daily business of buying and selling (without money). This novel also includes MacDonald’s version of the tale of “The Wandering Jew” (388-404, 489-93).⁷¹ *Gutta Percha Willie* (1873) includes a brief tale about a boy who receives a magical wand from a fairy (181-82). Other examples can be found throughout MacDonald’s oeuvre. As is clear from these descriptions, these stories are frequently

⁷⁰It was included in *Works of Fancy and Imagination*, 1871.

⁷¹ The story of the Wandering Jew is not unique to MacDonald. George Anderson dates it to approximately the 13th century, although elements can be traced much further back (16). However, the version in *Thomas Wingfold* is MacDonald’s own. Anderson notes that “it is rare to find so successful an effort to concentrate upon him within a framework of torment, while at the same time showing sympathy for his clear repentance, as in the account in George MacDonald’s *Thomas Wingfold, Curate*” (285). For more about MacDonald’s unique use of this legend, see Miho Yamaguchi (2004), “Poor Doubting Christian” and (2007), *George MacDonald’s Challenging Theology*.

violent and gruesome. They are also wildly entertaining, and like the sensational plot elements MacDonald so frequently uses, these stories help to hold his readers' interest, while also exposing them to strange and bizarre ideas and events. Embedded into supposedly realist stories, these tales act as reminders to his readers to look beyond commonplace existence.

Rather than simply use tales that can be dismissed as fantasy, MacDonald also incorporates many "real" stories into his novels. Many of these are simply stories told, either by the characters or the narrator, to fill in some of the back story. For example, *Alec Forbes of Howglen's* (1865) primary contribution to these interpolated tales is in the history of Mr. Cupples (325-30). *The Vicar's Daughter* (1872) devotes significant time to the life story of Marion Clare (132-53). *Castle Warlock* (1882) does this for Peter Simon (55-58), as does *Malcolm* (1875) for Duncan MacPhail, at least in part (177-80). MacDonald routinely interrupts his narrative to provide background information on his characters' lives. This technique is by no means unique to MacDonald; it is a common literary technique.

Nonetheless, in conjunction with the other ways MacDonald uses interpolated stories, these back stories become significant. In almost every case, the action occurs outside the limited time frame of the novel. They also frequently take place in locations other than the primary location of the overall book. Despite the non-supernatural nature of most of these back-stories, they widen the novels' sphere of reality by limiting the novel's anchorage in a particular time and place. The primary action may be so rooted, but the world of the novel encompasses a much wider scope.

But these are not the only stories MacDonald includes. His settings are frequently enriched with stories about the places' histories. Unlike the characters' histories, these tend to be quite strange. The manor house in *Annals of a Quiet Neighbourhood* houses some dark secrets. One of Walton's parishioners, Samuel Weir, tells Walton about his own birth

on a stormy night. Born out of wedlock to the governess, on the same night that his father was marrying the daughter of the house, Weir was almost drowned by his father's servant in the "Bishop's Basin . . . a deep pond at the foot of the old house" (106-07). He was rescued by the housekeeper and raised as her nephew (122). On the same night a mysterious scream comes out of the bridal chamber (121). This scream is never explained. The story may not be supernatural, but the effect of is to give the manor house, and the family who lives there, an air of mystery and unnaturalness. This is compounded by an additional story about the current occupants of the manor house in which, a few years before the main events of the novel, Mrs. Oldcastle kept her daughter prisoner and basically murdered her through cruelty and neglect (314-24). Just as the character backgrounds widen the sphere of reality, these stories widen the sphere of reality by injecting it with a bit of the bizarre and mysterious.

Other houses have other stories, many of them bringing in supernatural elements. The home of the Marquis of Lossie in *Malcolm* is said to have a cursed and haunted room. It was the chamber of Lord Gernon, and MacDonald interrupts the narrative to tell the story of the "lord of Lossie who practised unholy works" (162), was responsible for the mysterious and apparently supernatural disappearance of a young woman, and who supposedly still haunts the house (162-66). *Castle Warlock* is similarly interrupted by the story of the "auld captain" who came walking in the door and was clearly seen by the women keeping vigil over his corpse (69-70). *Donal Grant's* Castle Graham was once home to "a certain recklessly wicked wretch" who played cards with the devil late on a Saturday night and is still playing in the now permanently sealed room (104-05).⁷² *Donal Grant* also contains the stories of two other houses: one which was home to a child-killing monster (228-30), and the other which experienced nightly disturbances caused by the ghost

⁷² A similar tale is told of Glamis Castle in Angus, Scotland.

of an old butler who objected to having his skull buried (275-86). While each of these stories does, technically, interrupt the larger narrative of the novels, they serve an important function in MacDonald's overall purpose. Like the stories of character origins, these stories expand the time frame of the novel. Plus, they add an air of mystery and supernaturalism. Furthermore, that they all supposedly "actually happened" changes the reality of the narrative itself. Whether or not supernatural things take place in the primary narrative, these books take place in a world where the supernatural does exist. Again, MacDonald uses these stories to expand the vision of reality he wants his readers to see.

However much some modern scholars might object to MacDonald's interrupted narratives, like his authorial asides, these interpolated tales and stories span his oeuvre and are a fundamental part of his plan to teach his readers to see reality as more than commonplace everyday existence. Whether used to connect fairy land with our reality, thus expanding our reality to incorporate other worlds, to infuse reality with an air of supernaturalism and mystery, or simply to expand the boundaries of the novels by delving deeper into the fictional past, these stories are important in shaping the image of reality MacDonald portrays. They are not flaws; they are part of his vision. By helping to open his readers up to that larger vision of reality, MacDonald paved the way for his other ideas about the nature of that reality.

The Language of MacDonald's Reality

Much of the criticism of MacDonald's narrative techniques has objected to the preachiness of his style and to the impression that he "could apparently think of nothing better than to interpolate still more sermons and disquisitions into his stories, with, as we have noted, deadly results" (Reis, *George MacDonald* 126). However, as discussed above, MacDonald knew what he was doing with his interruptions; it was not that he "could apparently think of nothing better." Both his asides and his interpolated stories are used to

particular effect within their novels. It is a mistake, however, to assume that these are the only narrative methods MacDonald used. As noted earlier, Robb has claimed that a close reading of *Phantastes* reveals “details of verbal expression and formal structuring” (87) that can be otherwise missed. This is true of all of MacDonald’s fiction. Particularly easy to overlook is the way he specifically uses language to infuse an air of unreality into an otherwise realistic environment and an air of realism into an otherwise fantastic environment.

MacDonald’s interest in science has been well-established. MacDonald believed that science, rightly viewed, could be a stimulus to the imagination. In his essay on “The Imagination,” he writes about the ongoing discoveries in the field of paleontology and geology as triggering the “scientific imagination dashed with the poetic, [to] call up the form, size, habits, periods, belonging to an animal never beheld by human eyes” (15). Stephen Prickett (2005) credits these scientific discoveries as one of the primary triggers for the development of fantasy as a literary genre:

Monsters, more vast and variegated than the most fantastic imagination could dream of, were now suddenly being found under people’s very feet. They were in a few years to reshape man’s whole way of thinking about his world—and about himself In less than a generation, the monsters from underground had shattered an entire world picture and confronted man with dark, unimaginable vistas of prehuman history. (*Victorian Fantasy* 75)

Unlike many of his contemporaries, MacDonald did not find these discoveries faith-shaking. As Prickett points out, “The idea of development is central to MacDonald’s notion of morality. He saw life as a progressive enlightenment in which man climbs a kind of ladder, or scale of spiritual being. Not surprisingly, he found Darwin an immediate ally” (*Romanticism and Religion* 243). MacDonald recognized in those long ages of time “the

prospective, quiet, age-long labour of God preparing the world with all its humble, graceful service for his unborn Man” (“The Imagination” 15). For MacDonald, these scientific discoveries broadened his firmly God-centered understanding of reality and helped him see new and potentially unlimited avenues through which to recognize the hand of God.

Consequently, it is no surprise to find that his work is peppered with scientific language. Interestingly, this scientific language is quite commonly found in the fantasies and fairy tales. In “The Light Princess” (1864), the “college of Metaphysicians,” represented by the Materialist Hum-Drum and the Spiritualist Kopy-Keck⁷³ is called in to treat the princess’s lack of gravity. Both of them suggest cures solidly rooted in science. Kopy-Keck says

There is no relation between her and this world. She must therefore be taught, by the sternest compulsion, to take an interest in the earth as the earth. She must study every department of its history . . . But first of all she must study geology, and especially the history of the extinct races of animals—their natures, their habits, their loves, their hates, their revenges.

(22)

His counterpart’s suggestion is rooted in medical science. He insists that “the motion of her heart has been reversed. That remarkable combination of the suction and the force-pump works the wrong way” (22-23). He thinks they should “Phlebotomize until she is reduced to the last point of safety” (23). Both characters are caricatures, and both of their theories are wrong, but their theories ground “The Light Princess” in real-world science. Furthermore, Elmar Schenkel (1995) has suggested that “The Light Princess” is far more influenced by the science of MacDonald’s day than is usually thought. He writes that “one could shift the

⁷³ These names are, in themselves, interesting given MacDonald’s ideas. The Materialist, suggesting an exclusively physical approach to reality, is “Hum-Drum” and boring, whereas the Spiritualist is named Kopy-Keck, suggesting a tendency among religious people to simply parrot what they have been taught, rather than seek out the truth for themselves. Both of these are attitudes to which MacDonald objected.

emphasis to bring out new aspects—such as images and ideas bearing on scientific and technological paradigms that were then in the process of development” (46). Specifically, Schenkel connects “The Light Princess” with “anti-gravity fantasies” (47) and with early attempts to defy gravity, such as “the first balloon flights at the end of the eighteenth century, or even with earlier space-travel fantasies” (49), claiming that MacDonald’s story embodies the desire for “separation from the earth” that was growing among his contemporaries (55). “The Light Princess” is a fairy tale, but it is deeply grounded in science.

MacDonald’s connection of science and fantasy may be most clearly present in the *Princess* books. Larry Fink (2007) claims that “MacDonald reveals his comfortable attitude toward the ideas of an old earth and creation by evolution” (62) in *The Princess and the Goblin* and *The Princess and Curdie*. In the earlier book, MacDonald describes the origin of the Goblins in evolutionary (or more accurately devolutionary) terms. Having once lived above ground, they fled into the mountain and proceeded to transform until “[t]hey were now, not ordinarily ugly, but either absolutely hideous, or ludicrously grotesque both in face and form [They] were not so removed from the humans as such a description would imply. And as they grew misshapen in body, they had grown in knowledge and cleverness” (*Goblin* 13). MacDonald clearly describes the emergence of a separate species through generations of change and adaptation.

In *The Princess and Curdie*, his interest expresses itself even more clearly. The plot centers on a boy with the ability to discern what type of animal individuals are slowly turning into, drawing on Victorian fears of degeneration (Reiter 217-18), making MacDonald “one of [the] progenitors” of degeneration literature (Reiter 224). Furthermore, the novel opens and closes with geology. The first chapter is entitled “The Mountain” and it begins with an elaborate panegyric to the mountain:

A mountain is a strange and awful thing They are portions of the heart of the earth that have escaped from the dungeon down below, and rushed up and out. For the heart of the earth is a great wallowing mass, not of blood, as in the hearts of men and animals, but of glowing hot, melted metals and stones. And as our hearts keep us alive, so that great lump of heat keeps the earth alive: it is a huge power of buried sunlight - that is what it is. Now think: out of that cauldron, where all the bubbles would be as big as the Alps if it could get room for its boiling, certain bubbles have bubbled out and escaped - up and away, and there they stand in the cool, cold sky – mountains Caverns of awfulest solitude . . . waiting for millions of ages—ever since the earth flew off from the sun, a great blot of fire, and began to cool. (*Curdie* 9-12)

The entire passage extends over five pages. At the story's end, he comes back to the mountain. Instead of praising the growth of the mountain through long, countless ages of divine guidance, he records the destruction of the mountain in a few short ages of human greed and excessive mining (320). For both novels, MacDonald's use of science and the language of science helps to ground the stories in reality. They are fairy tales, full of magic and mystery, but they are not pure flights of fancy. They have roots in the science of this world. By thus rooting them, MacDonald forged a connection between the magical world of the stories and the reality with which his readers are familiar, expanding the perception of reality to encompass his magical world.

MacDonald's adult fantasies do this as well, but in slightly more subtle ways. At the beginning of *Phantastes*, as Anodos prepares to examine his father's desk for the first time, he muses: "Perhaps, like a geologist, I was about to turn up to the light some of the buried strata of the human world, with its fossil remains charred by passion and petrified by tears"

(14). A few lines later he writes: “the door of a little cupboard in the centre especially attracted my interest, as if there lay the secret of this long-hidden world” (15). Anodos does indeed find “the secret of this long-hidden world,” but instead of science, it turns out to be faerie—the ancestry of his grandmothers (18). That Anodos has fairy blood in his lineage (29) gives Fairy Land a link to the real world. The passing reference to geology and fossils underscores this link by suggesting that the genuine, albeit hidden, history of humanity includes Fairy Land. As he would later do in the *Princess* books, MacDonald’s approach in *Phantastes* expands reality by incorporating a magical other world into this one.⁷⁴

In *Lilith*, MacDonald takes a different tack, using the language of science not just to forge a connection between worlds, but to challenge the boundaries of science itself. Scientific connections and the ability of science to expand our understanding of reality are hinted at and established early in the novel as Vane introduces himself as a student of the physical sciences, due “chiefly [to] the wonder they woke” (7). He goes on to explain that he is drawn to the connections he finds “not only between the facts of different sciences of the same order, or between physical and metaphysical facts, but between physical hypotheses and suggestions glimmering out of the metaphysical dreams into which I was in the habit of falling” (7). A bit later, reminiscent of the *Princess* books, Raven draws on themes of evolutionary progress as he describes the animals of Uranus being “all burrowers They will be, for ages to come” and talks about a “hairy elephant or a deinotherium” (27). Here, as in the earlier books, is the idea of connections between the physical and the metaphysical, between science and imagination, between our world and others. However, MacDonald does not stop there.

He goes on to use the language of science to directly expand Vane’s understanding

⁷⁴ Stephen Prickett (1983) has argued that “This idea of two worlds co-existing in time and space, superimposed upon one another and yet, except for the occasional mysterious doorway, totally invisible to one another, is one of the most persistent themes of George MacDonald’s fantasy writing” (“Two Worlds” 14). For more about this see “The Two Worlds of George MacDonald.”

of the universe. Once arrived in Raven's dimension, Vane finds his scientific understanding challenged. Raven's reference to space travel and life on other planets (27) would, to the Victorian Vane, be something possible only in fiction. Furthermore, Raven informs Vane that he is "[i]n the region of the seven dimensions" (30), and he proceeds to explain that they are still in the same place, even though they aren't. The tree Vane sees is in the same place as his kitchen chimney (31), and the rosebush is where the piano otherwise is (32). When Vane protests that "two objects . . . cannot exist in the same place at the same time," Raven responds, "I remember now they do teach that with you. It is a great mistake—one of the greatest ever wiseacre made! No man of the universe, only a man of the world could have said so" (32-33). In light of twenty-first century explorations into multidimensionality and string theory, Raven's statement seems prescient, but in his own day, Vane's comment was the widely accepted scientific tenet. By referencing and challenging this idea, MacDonald challenges his readers to expand their interpretation of reality, to be people "of the universe" and not "of the world," to see reality through a wider, eternal lens. Whether he uses it specifically to connect his fantasies to reality or to expand the idea of reality itself, the language of science plays an important role in MacDonald's fantasy.

Scientific language makes its appearance in the non-fantasy literature as well, and is occasionally used to invoke a sense of wonder and mystery. The children's story *Gutta Percha Willie* has several such moments. The story surrounds Willie and all of the things he learns to do, from shoemaking and carpentry to his eventual decision to study medicine. George Bodmer explains that Willie's "father nicknames him 'gutta-percha,' after the rubber-like substance, because he is so flexible in acceding to the needs of those around him" (138). *Gutta Percha Willie* contains very little that could be considered fantastic. At one point, Willie's father calls him a "wizard" (262), and says that he "feel[s] as if [he] were

in a fairy tale” (261). But, overall, most of the novel is grounded in reality.⁷⁵ This does not, however, mean that it is devoid of wonder and mystery. Michael Düring (2000) suggests that *Gutta Percha Willie* “invites the reader to a way of observing that goes beyond the literal Victorian imagination to encompass the scientific and technological imagination” (10). Willie’s experiments and attempts are described at length throughout the book, in particular his attempts to devise a water-wheel that he can use to wake himself in the middle of the night, just to see what the night is like (*Gutta Percha* 272-80). MacDonald describes the feelings of a hypothetical individual coming upon the device without knowing what it was:

How little, even if he had caught sight of the nearly invisible thread, and had discovered that the wheel was winding it up, would he have thought what the tiny machine was about! How little would he have thought that its business was with the infinite! that it was in connection with the window of an eternal world—namely, Willie’s soul—from which at a given moment it would lift the curtains, namely, the eyelids, and let the night of the outer world in upon the thought and feeling of the boy! (278-79).

MacDonald goes on to describe “Some of the Sights Willie Saw” in the following chapter: a sky “as full of stars as it could hold” (283), “the air so full of great snowflakes that he could not see the moon through them” (284), “a glorious dance of the aurora borealis—in all the colours of a faint rainbow” (285), even a lunar eclipse (289-90). As Düring contends, “Willie’s inventions and constructions . . . are not only useful and relevant, but at the same time seek harmony with nature, and—as must never be left out with MacDonald—also a connection with God” (16). Through Willie’s experiments and his discoveries, MacDonald reminds his readers of the wonders of creation and the God whose “thinking [had] put it all

⁷⁵ For this reason, Rolland Hein has designated it a failure (*Victorian Mythmaker* 283).

there” (*Gutta Percha* 283).

Far more common in the non-fantasy literature, however, is the use of the language of fantasy and the supernatural. Just as he uses scientific language to ground his fantasies in reality, he uses fantastic language to cast an aura of mystery and other-worldliness over his non-fantasy novels. MacDonald uses this technique in nearly all his non-fantasies, so a few examples will suffice to give the overall impression. Of MacDonald’s non-fantasies, the one set at the farthest remove from MacDonald’s own time and place is *St. George and St. Michael* (1876). Taking place more than two hundred years before it was written, in the middle of the seventeenth century, *St. George* possesses a natural sense of other-worldliness. MacDonald suggests that the time period itself was more open to other possibilities than his own age. Among the characters in the book, witchcraft is still widely accepted as fact (22), and belief in astrology is almost unquestioned (262). MacDonald includes both a reputed witch and a reputed wizard among the central characters of the novel, playing on this belief in the supernatural. While both characters unmistakably turn out to be more scientific than magical, both encourage the belief in their powers among others. He describes Goody Rees as “believing in all kinds of magic and witchcraft but as innocent of conscious dealing with the powers of ill as the whitest-winged angel” (31). Her reputed powers are the result of “a rare therapeutic faculty, accompanied by a keen sympathetic instinct” and an understanding of “the virtues of some herbs” to rival any doctor in the area (31). Lord Herbert, similarly, is a scientist and inventor, but he encourages the belief, both inside and outside of the castle, that he is a wizard (120). MacDonald uses these characters and the attitudes of the others towards them to keep the existence of the supernatural alive in his novel. He consistently refers to Rees as “the witch” and Herbert as “the magician” or “the wizard” throughout the novel. Herbert’s actions, especially, are regarded in magical terms, even once it has become clear that he is

not a magician, just a gifted scientist and inventor. The chapter introducing Dorothy to Herbert's workshop is entitled "The Magician's Vault" (97). When his fire-engine is introduced, MacDonald writes that "the first of its race, it was not quite equal to the task the magician had imposed upon it" (124). A chair, operating by springs, which captures any person who sits in it, is referred to as "The Enchanted Chair" (143). At one point, Herbert designs a mechanical bat which he plans to use to identify a wrongdoer (271). When the event takes place (272-81), the reader knows that Herbert's actions are primarily smoke and mirrors, but MacDonald nonetheless presents them as they would have been seen by the members of the castle, giving the almost entirely scientific proceedings a mystical feel. *St. George and St. Michael* is ultimately much more of a scientific than a supernatural novel, but MacDonald routinely couches the scientific elements in mystical terms, inviting his readers to see through a mystical lens. Even though the events turn out to be realistic, the presence of a supernatural atmosphere lingers, reminding his readers of the possibility that more could be going on.

Nor is this the only means MacDonald employs. Throughout the book, he couches many things in magical or other-worldly language. Dorothy is like "a child who had uttered all her incantations" (3). The townspeople who enter the castle grounds are described as being "upon enchanted ground" (28). When Richard and Dorothy quarrel, Richard sees the "darkness as an unfriendly enchantress" (47). When they meet again, Richard is "as a sad ghost in a dream" (68). MacDonald makes reference to Richard's belief that "the dragon of priestly authority should breathe out his last fiery breath" (68). Dorothy is called "the naiad of Raglan" as she learns to manage the fire-engine and its water pump (137). Later, she is likened to a "captive lady in the stronghold of [an] evil knight" (248). Many other similar examples appear throughout the novel. Individually, these words and phrases are not particularly significant. Taken together and viewed in the context of MacDonald's purposes

for writing, they become highly significant. As with Herbert's "magic," nothing actually supernatural is going on in these scenes. But MacDonald uses the language of the supernatural to cast an otherworldly glow over perfectly natural events. Through the use of his language, MacDonald seeks to keep his readers' minds open to the possibility that there is more in existence around them than the mundane, everyday commonplace.

This use of language pervades MacDonald's non-fantasy fiction. Even in what is, arguably, the most purely realistic of his non-fantasy fiction, this language appears. *Alec Forbes of Howglen* has been singled out by multiple critics as the best of MacDonald's non-fantasy fiction (Hein, *Harmony Within* 5; Reis, *George MacDonald* 11), frequently by the same critics who most vehemently disparage MacDonald's non-fantasies for not being "realistic." Nonetheless, throughout *Alec Forbes*, MacDonald uses language that evokes a sense of fantasy and unreality. He writes that Robert Bruce was "like a great spider that ate children" (23). When a fresh snowfall covers the ground, MacDonald claims that Alec left his house and entered a "fairy-land He had discovered a world, without even the print of human foot upon it" (63). Annie sees the "ghostly light" in Alec's snow hollow (78), and when Alec finds her there, MacDonald writes that "[s]he might have been the frost-queen, the spirit that made the snow" (79). He compares the aurora borealis to a "dance of goblins" (83). When Alec goes to the city, it is "as if he had got to the borders of fairy-land" (147). The approach of spring forces winter "to withdraw his ghostly troops" (174). He compares the ocean tide to "a wild beast in the night" (294). When Mr. Cupples uses a "red-hot poker" to fight off some intruders, MacDonald says "the might of its enchantment vanished as the blackness usurped its blow" (301).⁷⁶ There are many other examples throughout the novel. Again, each individual word or phrase may not be particularly significant, but the sheer volume of these types of references is telling. They take an

⁷⁶ This scene is reminiscent of a scene in Walter Scott's *Rob Roy*, in which a poker-like object is used as a sword (338).

otherwise realistic story and filter it through an open-to-larger-realities way of seeing the world. The result is that MacDonald's reader is fed a steady stream of subtle hints about MacDonald's view that reality is much wider and larger than a perspective mired in the commonplace can see.

These passages can be found in all of MacDonald's non-fantasies. They happen too often to be simply accidental, and they appear too intentional to be written off simply as more evidence of MacDonald's bad writing. Robb has argued that the non-fantasies are MacDonald's attempt to show the "commonplace deliberately romanticised" ("Realism and Fantasy" 281). Robb is correct. MacDonald does filter the commonplace through a romantic lens. But this romanticization is a means to an end, not the end itself. He does not wish to simply show the commonplace in a romantic light. He seems to be trying to banish the commonplace altogether. In *The Marquis of Lossie* (1877), he characterizes the commonplace as a "dragon" (110), a very persistent one. He writes: "Wound it as you may, the jelly-mass of the monster closes, and the dull one is himself again—feeding all the time so cunningly that scarce one of the victims whom he has swallowed suspects that he is but pabulum slowly digesting in the belly of the monster" (110). As Alexander Graham prepares to speak to a small group at a church in London, MacDonald explains that "this knight of the truth might have been the very high priest of the monster which, while he was sitting there, had been twisting his slimy, semi-electric, benumbing tendrils around his heart. His business was nevertheless to fight him . . . to fight him in his own heart and that of other people" (112). He describes the effect of Graham's speech: "And while he spoke, lo! the dragon-slug had vanished; the ugly chapel was no longer the den of the hideous monster; it was but the dusky bottom of a glory shaft, adown which gazed the stars of the coming resurrection" (114). For MacDonald, a commonplace approach to life is not simply dull and boring; it is actively dangerous. By drawing on the language of fantasy, of dragons

and monsters, of knights and battles, to describe an attitude devoid of fantasy, he underscores its insidiousness and perilousness. He also makes it clear that it must be actively fought. This is what MacDonald tries to do in his novels.

Conclusion

Every time MacDonald uses the language of the fantastic to marvelize the worlds of his non-fantasies, he takes a swipe at the dragon of the commonplace. Every time he uses scientific language to connect the worlds of his fantasies to the world of his readers, he takes a swipe at the dragon of the commonplace. And with every swipe, he hopes to open a shaft through which a heavenly reality can shine through to his readers. He knows the commonplace can never be completely banished, but his job is “to fight him,” to remind his readers that there is more to life than a commonplace, everyday existence. There is a much wider reality, full of strange and wonderful things. Most importantly, MacDonald wants to point his readers in the ultimate direction of the loving and involved God at the center of that wider reality. Like his asides and his interpolated stories, his use of language is part of this purpose. MacDonald’s authorial asides, his interpolated tales and stories, and his language itself are all part of opening up the true expanse of reality for his readers and of taking his stand against the great monster of the commonplace.

Conclusion

Greville MacDonald's biography of his father (1924) includes a picture showing his father, along with a group of his literary contemporaries. Also included in the photograph are James Froude, Wilkie Collins, Anthony Trollope, William Thackeray, Thomas Macaulay, Edward Bulwer-Lytton, Thomas Carlyle, and Charles Dickens (353). Commenting on this same photograph, Richard Reis observes that "one can imagine a modern student of the period asking himself 'Who is George MacDonald, and what is *he* doing here?'" (*George MacDonald* 17). Reis goes on to explain that "Such a question would not have occurred to most of MacDonald's contemporaries. Instead, they might have expressed surprise to learn that he would be largely forgotten by the middle of the twentieth century" (17). MacDonald was both popular and highly respected throughout his lifetime. Nonetheless, when he died in 1905, he left behind a complex and diverse body of work and a reputation that was already beginning to crumble. The Victorian age had ended, and as it gave way to the Modern age, MacDonald was "cast into the literary dustbin reserved for those Victorians whom bright young things called 'eminent' as a term of contempt, and that included almost all the Victorians, especially if they were earnest, religious, hortatory, and wore beards" (Tennyson x). Literature moved on. Many of the characteristics which marked the great Victorian novelists came to be viewed as undesirable by the writers who rebelled against not only the values of the Victorian age, but the writing style. When the Victorians returned to fashion as an area for academic study, they did so without MacDonald. As MacDonald's literary reputation has grown in recent years, it has not been the result of renewed interest in a forgotten Victorian but of increasing academic interest in non-mainstream forms of fiction. While this interest has given MacDonald a significant place as one of the founders of modern fantasy, it has also resulted in the critical divide outlined in the Introduction. A handful of MacDonald's works are revered; the majority are

ignored or rejected.

As the previous chapters have explored, the reasons for this divide do not hold up under close scrutiny. Colin Manlove (1979) argues that MacDonald's non-fantasy novels lack "in all the random character of life. In short the author is making the experience, not life" ("Early Scottish Novels" 78). In essence, Manlove is correct. His mistake is in assuming that MacDonald ever intended to reproduce life as it is commonly understood. MacDonald *was* making an experience for his readers, not of life as it is, but of life as it could be. It is an experience of life lived with an eternal perspective. MacDonald saw a society around him that was being slowly swallowed up in commonplace ways of thinking, that was losing its sense of wonder and forgetting how to imagine greater things. He saw a humanity that had forgotten its origin, that was losing touch with even the idea of a broader existence. As his non-fiction writings make clear, MacDonald saw literature's primary purpose as teaching the human imagination to appreciate and explore the world around it. The purpose of that exploration is to learn more about the Creator and to exist in relationship with Him. Everything MacDonald wrote was an attempt to fulfill this purpose. The techniques that receive so much criticism for interfering with MacDonald's fiction, for interfering with the entertainment value of his novels, need to be re-evaluated in the context of MacDonald's purposes for writing.

MacDonald's works are an attempt, not to produce an accurate picture of everyday life, but to present an experience of life the purpose of which is to awaken his readers' imaginations. The previous chapters have looked at the various elements MacDonald used to do this across his career. By looking at how these various elements work together in a single novel, it is possible to see how they produce this overall experience. *What's Mine's Mine* (1886) is a fairly typical MacDonald non-fantasy novel. Set in the Scottish Highlands, it is the story of two brothers, Alister and Ian Macruadh, and their interaction with the

Palmer family, who has purchased most of the land historically belonging to their clan.

Neither his best novel, nor his worst, *What's Mine's Mine* brings together elements of plot, characterization, and style to produce the experience of life that MacDonald sought.

The overall plot of *What's Mine's Mine* is fairly straightforward. It delineates the growth of friendship (and eventually, in one pair, romance) between the Macruadh brothers and the Palmer sisters. Along the way, both Palmer sisters, following the example and teaching of their new friends, begin to change their way of seeing the world around them and to seek after eternal truths. This plot is punctuated by numerous incidents designed both to add excitement and arouse his readers' imaginations, as well as to illustrate the truths MacDonald wanted to convey. For starters, the novel includes numerous examples of MacDonald's characteristic plot elements, as described in Chapter Three. There are moments of danger and intrigue. Ian recounts an encounter with a pack of wild wolves where his life was in danger (99-105). He also recounts a narrow escape from Russia after an innocent encounter with a princess there. His friends tried to get him to leave on "a certain coach," but "Ian refused. He feared nothing, had done nothing to be ashamed of!" That night, armed men attacked that same coach and killed everyone aboard (166).⁷⁷ There are scenes designed to show the power of nature, along with God's use of nature and his protective hand. Ian and Christina are almost drowned in a flood (225-33). Mercy, wanting to come to a deeper understanding of nature, wanders into the hills and gets lost (247-53). MacDonald describes that Mercy "did not suspect that her grandmother (Nature) had been doing anything for her by the space around her, or that now, by the tracklessness, the lostness, she was doing yet more" (251).⁷⁸ There is a moment of prophetic insight, when Ian senses that he is seeing his homeland for the last time (286), and an unexplained ghostly

⁷⁷ Greville MacDonald notes that both of these incidents happened to his Uncle John (George's brother) during his time in Russia (166-67). Greville also notes that the character of Ian is "a very true portrait of my Uncle John . . . even if Ian more surely found himself than my uncle had time for in his short life" (166). The name *Ian* is the Gaelic form of John, further underscoring this relationship.

⁷⁸ For more about the role of nature in this novel, see John Pridmore (2000), "Nature and Fantasy."

encounter, when Alister sees what appears to be his deceased uncle bending over the fire (343-44). MacDonald also includes the familiar Gothic plot (Punter, *Literature of Terror Vol. 1*, 9) of a young woman imprisoned by a tyrannical father to keep her away from the man she loves. Mercy refuses to break her engagement to Alister, who has (in Mercy's father's eyes, anyway) insulted the family by refusing dowry because the money behind it came from whisky-making (311). Though she manages to arrange communication with Alister (338-40) and even escapes to see him (365-66), she is primarily a prisoner for quite some time. Eventually, as she continues to stand by Alister against her father's will, her father strikes her and literally throws her out of the house, freeing her to marry Alister almost immediately. All of these incidents add to the novel's texture, moving the plot along, and providing excitement and imaginative stimulation.

The primary action of the novel also includes an incident of poaching (183-87), though it is accidental as the offending party did not know the land boundaries, a fistfight (202-06), a case of wrongful imprisonment and a "jailbreak" (326-34), and a shooting (365). In addition to adding excitement, MacDonald uses each of these primary incidents to illustrate his larger purposes. Alister does not seek justice against the poacher, even though he killed a prized deer; he chooses rather to forgive. The fistfight comes about because a friend of the Palmers has been pestering a local girl against her wishes and refuses to stop, despite repeated warnings from Alister, showing a case where a certain degree of violence might be justified—in the defense of someone who cannot defend herself. Similarly, the jailbreak is fully justified because the prisoner has been wrongfully arrested (he is accused of poaching on Mr. Palmer's land, but he was actually on Alister's land, where he had full permission to be) and is being denied his right to see a magistrate. The incident is used to underscore the villain's villainy,⁷⁹ as well as to show a justifiable defense of the defenseless.

⁷⁹ See below for more about this.

The shooting is part of the novel's larger engagement with the idea of "legal crime," actions which are technically legal but morally wrong.⁸⁰ Mr. Palmer has purchased a large tract of land formerly belonging to Clanruadh, and he decides he wants to turn it into a deer-forest (239). In order to do this, however, he must evict an entire village.⁸¹ MacDonald describes Palmer's thought process:

for he believed himself about to do nothing but good to *the country* in removing from it its miserable inhabitants . . . Mr. Palmer's doing of good to the country consisted in making the land yield more money into the pockets of Mr. Brander and himself by feeding wild animals instead of men. To tell such land-owners that they are simply running a tilt at the creative energy, can be of no use: they do not believe in God, however much they may protest and imagine they do. (312)

The land does belong to Mr. Palmer. It is legally his to do with as he pleases. However, MacDonald makes it absolutely clear that, while legal, this is wrong. It is immoral to turn already impoverished people away from what subsistence they have. It shows a complete and total lack of human compassion, and submission to greed. Identified by MacDonald throughout his entire oeuvre as the "worship of Mammon," the privileging of money over humanity and human need was one of the biggest issues he saw facing society. He sought to give his readers a different perspective, to encourage them to see beyond the usual way of looking at business and human interaction.

At the same time, he shows the other side of the issue as well. When the villagers receive notice of their impending eviction, many of them express their readiness to stand and fight for their rights. MacDonald, however, presents a different view of the matter. As

⁸⁰ See Chapter Three for more about this.

⁸¹This is MacDonald's comment on the Highland Clearances, which began after Culloden (1746) and continued through the nineteenth century, and involved the forced removal of Highlanders "to make way for sheep" (Crawford, "History" 303).

Alister says, “It is not a question of the truth; that we should be bound to die for, of course. It is only our rights that are concerned, and they are not worth dying for. That would be mere pride, and a denial of God who is fighting for us” (348). When his clansman protests that “God does not always give men their rights,” Alister responds “God *does* care for our rights. A day is coming . . . when he will judge the oppressors of their brethren . . . He is my chief. I will have what he wills, not what I should like! A thousand years I will wait for my rights if he chooses. I will trust him to do splendidly for me” (348-49). Alister holds firmly to this position, even asking the men in the clan not to take weapons when they go to gather peat for the winter, even though he knows it is likely that an attempt will be made to prevent them (358). Alister ends up getting shot (not seriously); however, he does not take revenge or even seek justice. He merely continues on with doing what he can to help his people. At first glance, this seems like a difficult position to understand. It would seem to make more sense to stand up for and insist upon one’s rights. And indeed, from a worldly perspective, that does make more sense. But MacDonald did not want his readers to see things from a worldly perspective. The heart of MacDonald’s purpose as a writer was to awaken his readers to their need for a right relationship with God, part of which was trying to see things the way God sees them. He filters these transactions through the lens of an eternal, God-centered perspective. By juxtaposing these different situations of greed and violence with a few scenes of justified violence (in defense of another) and with non-violent, Christ-like responses, MacDonald presents his readers with a thoroughly different view of the world. It is not “realistic” in the strictest sense; it is not meant to be. MacDonald intentionally presents an alternative to “reality” in the hopes of teaching his readers to see a different range of possibilities.

With his characters, MacDonald infuses *What’s Mine’s Mine* with the full range of imaginative engagement explored in Chapter Four. On one end of the spectrum is Mr.

Palmer. He is introduced as being wealthy, and having “a good opinion of himself—on what grounds I do not know” (6). MacDonald writes that “In good health and when things went well, as they had mostly done with him, he was sweet-tempered; what he might be in other conditions was seldom conjectured” (5-6). As the novel progresses, MacDonald explores precisely what Palmer’s self-satisfaction and self-centeredness become when faced with adverse circumstances. As shown above, his greed and self-interest leads him to force the villagers off the land on which they had lived for generations in order to increase his own wealth, and he is willfully blind to the true nature of that action. However, his true colors are not revealed until Alister refuses his proffered dowry on the grounds that the money came from the manufacture of whisky. MacDonald writes that “Then first [Mercy] knew her father!—for although wrath and injustice were at home in him, they seldom showed themselves out of doors” (310-11). He locks her away, promising that she will never see Alister again, and fully expecting that she will soon capitulate to his will. When Mercy stands firm, he grows angrier and angrier, until he tells his wife to “Lock her up in the coal-hole—bury her if you like! I shall never ask what you have done with her! Never to see her again is all I care about!” (335). While his wife tries to convince herself that he spoke merely from anger and “did not mean it,” MacDonald makes clear that “he did mean it; at that moment he would with joy have heard the earth fall on her coffin” (336).

Palmer’s biggest problem is his own pride, his satisfied sense of self, and his utter refusal to see himself, or the things around him, in any other way. MacDonald explains:

Mr. Palmer was in the worst of positions as to protection against himself.

Possessed of large property, he owed his position to evil and not to good. Not only had he done nothing to raise those through whom he made his money, but the very making of their money his, was plunging them deeper and deeper in poverty and vice: his success was the ruin of many. Yet was he full

of his own imagined importance—or had been full until now that he felt a worm at the root of his gourd—the contempt of one man for his wealth and position. Well might such a man hate such another . . . Persons more *respectable* than Mr. Palmer are capable of doing the most wicked and lawless things when their selfish sense of their own right is uppermost. (362-63)

Palmer falls into that class of MacDonald characters who have completely rejected a true view of reality. He willfully refuses to see himself as he truly is. He prides himself on dignity and respectability in the eyes of society. That those characteristics are a sham, he never acknowledges. Instead, he continues to run headlong into moral degradation and, eventually, financial ruin (386). He serves as a warning to MacDonald's readers of the dangers of a limited and self-centered view.

At the beginning of the novel, his two eldest daughters are in danger of following a similar route. He describes them as “being, in their development, if not in their nature, commonplace” (14). As the previous chapters have explored, MacDonald's novels were intended to combat commonplace attitudes in his readers. Here, he shows how commonplace attitudes can be transformed. Christina and Mercy are commonplace in the beginning primarily because of a lack of proper education. MacDonald explains that “Had they been in any degree truly educated, they would have been quite capable of an opinion of their own, for they had good enough faculties” (52). When they first meet the Macruadh brothers, Christina's only interest in them is the opportunity they provide for diversion and flirtation. Her “whole interest in men was the admiration she looked for and was sure of finding from them” (83). MacDonald says that her “world was a very small one, and in its temple stood her own image” (92). She has to learn to put herself aside, to see that she is not the center of everything, and to seek after more than just temporary admiration. Not

much happens for Christina, however, until the day of the flood when she and Ian are faced with the very real possibility of drowning, as Ian tries to hold her above the rapidly rising water. MacDonald describes her feelings:

How was it that, now first in danger, self came less to the front with her than usual? It was that now first she was face to face with reality. Until this moment her life had been an affair of unrealities. Her selfishness had thinned, as it were vaporized, every reality that approached her. Solidity is not enough to teach some natures reality; they must hurt themselves against the solid ere they realize its solidity Christina was shivering in its grasp on her person, its omnipresence to her skin; its cold made her gasp and choke The recognition of inexorable reality in any shape, or kind, or way, tends to rouse the soul to the yet more real, to its relations with higher and deeper existence. (226-27)

This event forces Christina to look outward, to embrace a greater reality than any she has previously acknowledged. Significantly, the next chapter is entitled “Change” and focuses primarily on how Christina is different. This encounter with true reality “had awaked the simpler, the real nature of the girl” (233). Shepherded by Ian, Christina begins to question and better understand the world around her, and by the end of the novel, she is well along the way towards being a better and stronger person.

Mercy’s journey is less traumatic, but just as necessary. She is not as closed off as Christina in the beginning. Her interest is piqued by the conversations she and her sister have with the Macruadh brothers, even though she does not necessarily understand. MacDonald describes an early reaction: “though she could hardly have said she found the conversation *very* interesting, [she] felt there was something in the men that cared to talk about such things, that must be interesting if she could only get at it” (88). She begins to try

to “get at it.” Whenever the opportunity presents itself, she engages in conversation with the brothers, asking questions and really trying to understand. For example, she asks Ian how she can learn to experience nature the way he and his brother do. After trying to explain, Ian tells her to go, alone, into the hills, to get away and be completely alone with nature, and “be still. By and by, it may be, you will begin to know something of Nature” (220). It takes her awhile, but Mercy eventually follows Ian’s advice. She ends up getting lost and, for the first time in her life, tries sincerely to pray (247-53). She ends up being rescued by Alister and Ian, catching cold, and staying with their mother for a few weeks, during which time, through continued interaction with Ian and Alister, she makes rapid progress, both through Ian’s teaching and her blossoming love for Alister (260-66). Before too long, Mercy has grown enough in her understanding and embrace of true reality that she accepts Alister’s reasons for not accepting her father’s proposed dowry (310), defies her father when he speaks lies against Alister (377), and endures their separation with peacefulness and patience (337). She has opened herself up to a true understanding of reality, and has begun to let that understanding shape and direct her life.

Finally, the novel includes the Macruadh brothers, who embody a right relationship to reality and God. Of Alister, MacDonald writes, “If Alister Macruadh was not in the highest grade of Christianity, he was on his way thither, for he was doing the work that was given him to do, which is the first condition of all advancement. He had much to learn yet, but he was one who, from every point his feet touched, was on the start to go further” (122). Alister is a truly good man, who struggles to do what is right in every situation. He has some missteps along the way, such as when he allows his pride to make him rude to a neighbor (58-61). But where Palmer allows his pride to dominate his life, Alister struggles hard to overcome and subdue his pride, and by the end of the novel has largely done so, choosing to face Palmer’s injustice with equanimity instead of temper. He even offers

Palmer the first chance to purchase his remaining land once he decides to emigrate to Canada with the rest of his clan, not because he wants Palmer to have the land, but because he feels it is the right thing to do (375).

Ian is the spiritual center of the novel, following in the footsteps of David Elginbrod, Robert Falconer, Andrew Comin (*Donal Grant*), Old Rogers (*Annals of a Quiet Neighbourhood*) and so many others across MacDonald's oeuvre. MacDonald writes that "Ian seemed to his brother, who knew him best, hardly touched with earthly strain" (61). He is not only aware of a greater reality; he inhabits that reality completely. He constantly searches after "truth, and higher truth" (62), and he seeks to help others do the same. He speaks against his mother's harsh Calvinism (107-112). Throughout the entire novel, he is the primary teacher (at least in words) of both Christina and Mercy as they learn to look outwards and embrace a true vision of reality. He is also the one who pushes Alister to even higher heights of understanding and belief, such as when he points out that Alister cares more for the land on which he lives than for the will of God (242-47) and that Alister's duty when his prize stag is killed is to show kindness to the man who killed him (187-88). Ian is the one who *speaks* the concepts so central to MacDonald's view of reality, as well as lives them.

He speaks these concepts quite a lot. As in most of MacDonald's novels, the characters frequently discuss reality and the nature of truth and existence.⁸² These conversations happen repeatedly throughout the book, but one example will suffice to demonstrate. During the flood, while Ian holds Christina above the water and they wait for it to subside, Ian comments on the danger they are facing. He says "what better way of going out of the world is there than by the door of help? No man cares much about what the idiots of the world call life! What is it whether we live in this room or another? The same

⁸² This was developed in Chapter Five.

who sent us here, sends for us out of here” (227). Christina protests that “Most men care very much!” So Ian explains, “I don’t call those who do, men! They are only children! I know many men who would no more cleave to this life than a butterfly would fold his wings and creep into his deserted chrysalis-case. I do care to live—tremendously, but I don’t mind where. He who made this room so well worth living in, may surely be trusted with the next!” (228). Ian sees the world through a God-centered view of reality; consequently, questions of life and death take on an entirely different meaning. As Ian explains this to Christina, MacDonald explains it to his readers, using this discussion (and others) as a vehicle for conveying his most important themes.

He also interrupts the narrative along the way to directly address his audience, commenting both on his choices as a writer and his reasons for them, as well as on the characters and actions involved. After the discussion just mentioned, he breaks into the narrative and writes, “You are right: it was odd to hold such a conversation at such a time! But Ian was an odd man. He actually believed that God was nearer to him than his own consciousness, yet desired communion with him! and that Jesus Christ knew what he said when he told his disciples that the Father cared for his sparrows” (229). In an earlier scene, he explained why he did not give a conversation between Mercy and Christina:

They were criticizing certain of the young men they had met at the said ball. Being, in their development, if not in their nature, commonplace, what should they talk about but clothes or young men? And why, although an excellent type of its kind, should I take the trouble to record their conversation? To read, it might have amused me—or even interested, as may a carrot painted by a Dutchman; but were I a painter, I should be sorry to paint carrots, and the girls’ talk is not for my pen. (14)

As he does throughout his oeuvre, he uses this technique in *What’s Mine’s Mine* to reiterate

his themes and to focus his readers' attention on what is really important.

In addition, *What's Mine's Mine* includes a number of interpolated tales. Ian tells his mother about a hunting trip he took in Russia, when he was hunting wolves and spent a night caught in a tree (99-105). He tells Alister about his friendship with the Russian princess and his narrow escape from murder on the doomed coach (163-67). Both of these stories are true within the context of the novel; as such, they add depth to Ian's character. By taking place in a distant land, they also broaden the world of the novel, bringing in the strange and unfamiliar. MacDonald also includes a less natural tale. Ian tells Mercy a story about an old woman who is given shelter one night by a rich old farmer. In the middle of the night he wakes and sees six strange lights around her bed. In the morning, she is certain that they were the spirits of her six dead children. She dies some time later, and the farmer has a dream that the same woman comes to him asking for a light, which he grants her, but she is unable to light her candle at his fire. So she leaves and he follows, all the way to the gates of Heaven where he hears her petition St. Peter for permission to go back and warn the farmer about what awaits him after death (131-36). This story reiterates MacDonald's themes, once again, as well as adding a dash of supernaturalism to the novel, expanding the world of the novel in different directions altogether.

Finally, MacDonald also peppers the novel with the language of fairy tale and fantasy to cast an air of mystery and supernaturalism across a predominantly realist setting. Mistress Conal is described as having "a reputation for witchcraft" (31). She even has a black cat (323). Throughout the novel, he personifies Nature as a person, even calling her "Grannie" (222, and elsewhere). When the villagers move, en masse, onto Alister's land in the middle of the night, the authorities who come the following day to enforce their eviction notices are described as "look[ing] at each other as if the duty before them were not altogether *canny*" (370). When Mercy is thrown out of her father's home and runs to

Alister's mother, his mother hides her. When Alister returns from London, and she jumps into his arms, MacDonald writes that "It was come true! The princess was arrived!" (383). There are many other examples throughout the novel where, as he does throughout his oeuvre, MacDonald uses language to infuse his novels with an air of mystery and strangeness, all designed to further his aims of awakening and educating his readers' imaginations.

Taken all together, these elements add up to a particular reading experience. It does not reflect life as it is commonly recognized so much as life as it could be if lived in contact with and awareness of true reality. MacDonald believed that reality is not the commonplace, everyday thing most people think it is. It is a wide, wondrous, God-centered expanse of marvelous and magnificent things. MacDonald wanted his readers to understand and experience that reality, and to incorporate it into their view of the world. Consequently, his novels reflect that reality, putting it into human shape and form, for his readers to experience. He made no secret that this was his intention. On the contrary, he goes out of his way to make sure his readers understand. His literary choices in regards to plot, characterization, and style all reflect this purpose and are a fundamental part of carrying it out.

MacDonald is neither the first nor the last author to use his works to produce a particular experience for his readers. Even among his Victorian contemporaries, many of whom are still highly regarded in academic and popular circles, examples can be seen. Dickens frequently presented his readers with characters and situations exaggerated to grotesque and macabre proportions. In *Great Expectations* (1860-61), for example, he opens with a scene a young boy being terrorized by an escaped convict in a graveyard (3-7). The novel is full of violent and sensational episodes, and many of the characters are exaggerated beyond a realistic presentation. The most obvious example is Miss Havisham,

with her decaying wedding dress (57) and mouse-eaten, mold-covered wedding cake (85). Her extreme reaction to having a broken heart is exaggerated to the point where she becomes grotesque. Jaggers, oozing sliminess and false charm, is a caricature of the negative aspects of the legal profession. Pip's sister is an over-the-top termagant, and most of the supporting characters are exaggerated to satirize various elements of society. While such types of people may actually exist, Dickens is not making realistic characters. He is intentionally exaggerating and caricaturing to produce a particular experience of society.

Another example can be found in Thomas Hardy's *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* (1891). George MacDonald has been heavily criticized for the machinations of plot (chance encounters, coincidences, divine intervention, etc.) through which he brings about his eventual happy endings.⁸³ Hardy's plot is no less carefully orchestrated, though it comes to a completely different conclusion. From the very beginning of the novel, the plot marches steadfastly on towards the tragic ending, and once begun down that path, there is no turning back for any of the characters. From the moment Tess first meets Alec D'Urberville (48), her fate is sealed. Yet the story tries, repeatedly, to go in a different direction. Peter Allan Dale (1989) claims that "the story shows us Hardy working harder . . . to create an image of hope, of paradise regainable" (255). Time and time again, the story approaches a potential turning point, something which could change everything and set it right, but it never happens. Tess never gets a break. Tess's story marches forward, irrevocably towards its tragic outcome. Dale calls this Hardy's "doctrinaire pessimism" (253); the only answer to why these things happen is that "in our 'blighted world' these things are bound to happen" (253). Hardy orchestrates the plot of *Tess*, forcing it into a tragic direction, to produce a specific effect, a specific experience for his readers of what life is like on a "blighted" world (Hardy 37) like ours.

⁸³ For a complete discussion of this, see Chapter Three.

MacDonald is not unique in his desire to create a particular experience for his readers. Writers have been doing this for centuries. He may, however, be unique in the type of particular experience he sought to construct. His son, Greville, certainly believed so. Greville writes:

from [George's] point of view, it was impossible to paint true pictures if he ignored the source of all light and colour and joy Never has his method been attempted before or since; and, granted the truth of his premise, it is neither illogical nor inartistic. Even if his characters are sometimes too good or too wicked for credence, so were many authentic saints and kings. Even if his sense of the inseparability of the highest art from the highest truth necessitated a too frequent elucidation in didactic form, why, many writers—in his day and even now—offend in such wise, if with no inspiration or definite purpose, and yet are read largely. (374)

George MacDonald's message is a profoundly religious one. He is didactic. He does preach. No honest appraisal of MacDonald's work can deny this. By his own admission, he viewed himself as a man with a message that needed to be heard. He sought to tell his readers that there is a loving Father-God at the heart of the universe, and he sought to encourage his readers to seek out that God as the "source of all light and colour and joy." This is the central message of his work; it appears on nearly every page he ever wrote in some way or another.

And it is this message which has cost MacDonald both readers and critical appreciation. Dickensian satire and Hardy-esque pessimistic cynicism seem to reflect more closely the general mood, than MacDonald's optimistic belief "in Man and the joy and peace he might find in life if he would but accept it," which has caused him to be "dismissed by the ordinary novel-reader because he is 'always preaching'" (Greville

MacDonald 374-75). Muriel Hutton (1975) justifiably states that “Non-Christians may abhor this purpose and the use of the novel to fulfill it.” However, she also cautions that “both are legitimate to an artist and must not too readily be dismissed as naïve, sentimental, or narrowly didactic. It is a pity if some prejudice in us makes us incapable of response to what MacDonald has set out to demonstrate” (43-44). MacDonald’s literary merit should not be judged on whether or not society agrees with his agenda, but on whether or not he succeeds in achieving what he sets out to achieve. George MacDonald does succeed. As discussed in Chapter Two, MacDonald believed that “Truth to Humanity, and harmony within itself, are almost the sole unvarying essentials of a work of art” (*The Portent* iii). His novels are consistently true to his vision of humanity, and within themselves the various elements work in harmony to produce the experience he sought for his readers.

In the end, the question of whether or not George MacDonald wrote good novels is a matter of taste. Some people will never enjoy reading him because they just do not like his style. Others may object to his religious message, or to the use of fiction as a platform for religious preaching. That is the right of the reader. But for MacDonald’s critics, the time when they could simply dismiss and reject MacDonald’s non-fantasy novels out of hand has passed. They do not have to like these works. They do not need even to devote great deals of time to studying them if they do not wish. They do, however, need to acknowledge that MacDonald had a purpose and that he accomplished that purpose using all the weapons he had in his arsenal. He set out to rescue his fellow humans from the dragon of the commonplace. He wrote poetry and prose. He wrote fiction and non-fiction. He wrote sermons and essays, and he wrote fairy tales, fantasies, and non-fantasies. He drew on German, Scottish, and English sources. He drew on realism, Gothicism, and sensationalism. His novels are full of supernatural elements and violent episodes. They feature natural disasters and dramatic revelations designed to interest his readers and arouse

their imaginations. They revolve around characters who are idealized, who live the life MacDonald sought for his readers, and they show the dangers of refusing that life through characters who have so refused. They break the bonds of straightforward narrative with interpolated stories designed to expand the world of the novel, as well as the world of the readers. Even his very language points to the uncharted realms of existence that MacDonald wanted his readers to experience. These are not mistakes; they are not literary failures. They are the legitimate artistic choices of a writer trying to do something unique and important. George MacDonald may never achieve the reputation or popularity of some of his contemporaries, but he was definitely not a failure as a non-fantasy writer. He deserves to be read, appreciated, and studied for producing a body of work that truly conveys his vision of humanity and the universe in which we live.

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